

For Mom and Dad

Promotor	Prof. dr. Stef Craps
Co-supervisor	Prof. dr. Pieter Vermeulen
Decaan	Prof. dr. Gita Deneckere
Rector	Prof. dr. Rik Van de Walle



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Containment and Nuclear Memory in Contemporary Climate Change Fiction

River Martin Ramuglia

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Introduction: Containment and Cli-Fi

Climate science has long spoken of our planet's utter indifference to our environmental preferences, and, indeed, to the survival of global ecosystems that support human and nonhuman life. Nevertheless, in an extraordinary feat of collective cognitive dissonance, capitalism forges ahead with its extractive economies, all but ensuring that climate processes will, in a matter of decades, convert many regions of our planet, and sentence those who live in them, to greenhouse misery. If this sounds blunt, consider Roy Scranton's more succinct (and more famous) appraisal of the world's situation with respect to climate change: "we're fucked" (16). I depart slightly from Scranton's doomerism, however, and write with the understanding that significant mitigation of and adaptation to climate change is still possible, as is described in detail by climate scientist Michael E. Mann.¹ Even so, faced with Earth's indifference, humanity must grapple with a parallel teleological crisis. Presently, without any apparent collective interest or wherewithal to enact large-scale, systemic changes that might forestall the worst of greenhouse misery and the attendant procession of extinction events, how, to what, and for what do we direct ourselves as individuals? Inside the intellectual frame of the Anthropocene, having any goal or purpose at all necessitates psychological management of climate change's bleak certainties.² This thesis is interested less in what these goals might be (e.g. environmental justice, systems change, equality, pleasure, survival, etc.),

¹ Mann writes that some combination of adaptation, mitigation, and geo-engineering can avert some of the worst possible climate outcomes (Mann 221).

² The Anthropocene, as Pieter Vermeulen explains, is the "new name for a new epoch" made famous by Eugene Stoermer and Paul Crutzen. Marked by the end of the Holocene, a "relatively stable and mild geological epoch in which human life had flourished for 11,700 years," the term names the point at which "humans [became] a proper geological (rather than merely social or biological) agent akin to meteorites and volcanoes ... [creating] a planet that has been thoroughly shaped by human interventions" such as climate change (Vermeulen 4). Vermeulen identifies a few of the Anthropocene's numerous terminological variants, including "Capitalocene" (Malm; Moore), "Plantationocene" (Haraway et al.), "Homogenocene" (Samways), "Oliganthropocene" (Swyngedouw), and "Chthulucene" (Haraway). For more repackagings, see Bonneuil and Fressoz. My personal favorite is the "Alienocene" (Neyrat).

and more in the material, psychological, and cultural mechanisms by which we, as individuals who operate in collectives at various social scales, avoid succumbing to despair, melancholia, psychosis, resignation, denial, cynicism, and/or degeneracy as a result of climate change. I am not suggesting that the evil aims imagined in dystopian literature (e.g. nuclear holocaust, engineered plagues, etc.) are valid courses of action; simply that *any* action requires some subtending, authenticating structure that makes it possible in the face of extraordinary suffering. This is, perhaps, a philosophical concern too broad for the present study, but it inflects everything that follows in the fleeting textual safe-house that is this thesis.

The final scene of Lars von Trier's film *Melancholia* exemplifies the dynamic I aim to capture. The film allegorizes the effects of climate change through a collision between Earth and the fictional planet named Melancholia.³ The film's setting is a luxurious estate in the countryside: a shelter well fortified by expansive plazas, the pleasurable greenery of a golf course and woodlands, and endless numbers of rooms for guests attending the wedding reception of the protagonist, Justine (Kirsten Dunst). This reception unfolds against the backdrop of the gradual, ominous approach of Melancholia, causing Justine to fall apart mentally and physically. The characters in her orbit distract themselves from Melancholia's approach by treating it as a passing curiosity, but Justine knows that the planet's impact means annihilation. Confronting the existential gravity of Melancholia's approach, Justine lapses into the psychological state of the same name, and becomes literally unable to move or participate meaningfully in the community around her. The final scene of the film depicts an overt symbol of shelter superimposed over the figure of Melancholia in its totality just as the planet strikes Earth. As Timothy Clark explains, the image of a total globe carries a number of symbolic meanings connected to climate change:

The image of the whole earth is already the obvious emblem of the Anthropocene. The very plurality, contradictoriness and evasiveness of interpretations of the image make it doubly appropriate for this purpose. The image has been read as an icon of life's almost unbearable fragility; as the achievement through technology of the age-old dream of a god's eye view; an instance of the contingent privilege of vision in the human sense of what something "really" is; a terrifying view of its target from a weapons platform. (13)

Of course, the whole-planet symbol here is not Earth but its doppelgänger Melancholia, converting this figure from a "target" of (presumably nuclear) weapons assault into the annihilative weapon itself. *Melancholia* undoubtedly co-opts the visual power of the

³ This reading is not entirely out of left field: Tim Matts and Aidan Tynan have touched on the environmental dimensions of the film.

nuclear blast to depict the global threat of climate change, a reading invited by Susan Sontag's assertion in 1966 that "the imagination of disaster does not greatly differ from one period in history to another ... the imagery of disaster in science fiction films is above all the emblem of an *inadequate response*" (224). The nuclear blast, rearticulated by *Melancholia* in service of the new but similar global "risk scenario" of climate change (Heise 141), uses the figure of inadequate shelter in the face of planetary-scale impacts to demonstrate the fragility and importance of rationalizing structures that lend meaning and purpose to life in the Anthropocene. From a comfortable cinematic distance, it is aesthetically pleasing to watch Justine and her family remain calm before doom (Figure 1).



Figure 1 Lars von Trier, *Melancholia*. Melancholia approaches.

This thesis names this structural-symbolic reflex against climate change *containment*. Containment refers to the set of practices, social relations, architectures, spaces, theoretical frames, and rhetorical situations that mitigate the experience of what Rob Nixon calls the "slow violence" of climate change (2). According to Mark Johnson, containment is one of many schemata that govern our experience of the world and bring structure to abstract concepts. He pinpoints the genesis of containment's metaphorical use in physical experience:

[T]he experiential basis for *in-out* orientation is that of spatial boundedness. The most experientially salient sense of boundedness seems to be that of three-dimensional containment (i.e., being limited or held within some three-dimensional enclosure, such as a womb, a crib, or a room). ... physical *in-out* orientation involves separation, differentiation, and enclosure, which implies restriction and limitation ... The experience of containment typically involves protection from, or resistance to, external forces. (22)

Depending on one's position in this schema, protective qualities are either conferred by one's being on the *outside* of a contained danger (such as nuclear waste storage facilities), or *inside* a protective barrier of some kind (such as the Svalbard Global Seed Vault).

Positionality aside, due to climate change's entanglements with nearly every aspect of human experience, its containment involves forms stretchy enough for the topologically complex arrangements of eco-cultural space. Most find containment through adherence to the directives of a neoliberal, capitalistic, consumeristic society, but in *Melancholia*, Justine's condition is linked to the *failure* of these directives. The film asserts that everyone, regardless of geographic location, class, or level of fortification, will eventually suffer from the effects of climate change. To abate her condition, Justine seeks other forms of containment such as aesthetic beauty and social repair, finally settling on a transparent, ostentatiously inadequate figure of shelter and community.⁴

Containment is accompanied by its sibling concept *locality*, a term that appears regularly throughout this thesis to describe the space, field, or force being contained. The final scene of *Melancholia* depicts locality as the space inside the shelter constructed by Justine and her family, a space converged upon by the failure of other, larger localities—namely the estate where the wedding reception takes place. Although Justine's shelter is small, its meaning is amplified in the presence of the whole-planet image, showing how climate change stretches the coordinates of the local and global to their extremes while maintaining their conceptual separation. In this way, localities can be small but referentially expansive, and global space can have profound effects on local space. Justine's shelter stands in for planet Earth, while *Melancholia* represents the cosmic scale just beyond the film's perceptual scope. More simply, localities are fields of containment that depend upon and are situated within larger contexts, but restrict access to or awareness of them in some way.

Localities are not just spatial entities. In the way that Arjun Appadurai originally developed the concept, locality is

primarily relational and contextual rather than ... scalar or spatial ... [It is] a complex phenomenological quality, constituted by a series of links between the sense of social immediacy, the technologies of interactivity, and the relativity of contexts. (178)

Appadurai foregrounds media and social relations in the production of locality, represented in *Melancholia* by the family's joining of hands and the transparency of the shelter. The boundaries of a locality, therefore, can be glimpsed in forms beyond architecture. As Henri Lefebvre explains,

We are thus confronted by an indefinite multitude of spaces, each one plied upon, or perhaps contained within, the next: geographical, economic, demographic,

⁴We might also read this structural inadequacy as a symbol of unresolvable ecological grief (Craps, "Introduction: Ecological Grief").

sociological, ecological, political, commercial, national, continental, global. Not to mention nature's (physical) space, the space of (energy) flows, and so on. (8)

To fully define any given locality would necessitate consideration of all these terms; it follows that the capacities of literature and narrative can only sketch locality and containment in so many dimensions at once, which is consistent with Timothy Morton's oft-cited description of climate change as a "hyperobject" (*Hyperobjects* 23).⁵

Because containment involves so many categories of space, approaching climate change in this way risks a scope too wide for meaningful analysis. If climate change is caused by individual and collective enmeshments in global petrocapi-talism, where do we even begin to trace this container? To avoid grappling with Timothy Clark's "'ecology' of everything and anything" (*Ecocriticism on the Edge* 145), I isolate containment and locality with respect to the emergent category/genre/approach of climate change fiction, also known as "cli-fi."⁶ Cli-fi is itself a form of cultural containment, but one expansive enough to engage with climate change and make it legible.⁷ Ecocritics who have taken up the task of defining cli-fi are beset with problems of delimitation, but tend toward the expansion of its territories, working against the impulse to contain it according to any strict set of parameters. As Adam Trexler explains in his foundational study *Anthropocene Fictions*, contemporary scholarship, with some ecocriticism excepted, has tended to fixate on the development of a canon in line with neoliberal professional directives:

The academic promotion system feeds into this model by supporting research on "well-known" authors. Nevertheless, this preselected canon obscures some of the most important questions about climate fiction, excluding wider arguments about how climate change is imagined, the role of the novel in the face of the Anthropocene, and the formal possibilities of fiction in that confrontation. (11)

Thankfully, recent scholarly engagements with cli-fi have picked up on Trexler's early concerns about treating "writers as risky assets in the scholar's portfolio" (11). In their

⁵ From a narratological point of view, containment and locality can be understood through Marie Laure-Ryan's development of narrative space. In progressively wider frames, she differentiates methods by which space is formed within a given text, explaining that, "As readers or spectators progress through the narrative text, they gather spatial information into a cognitive map or mental model of narrative space. Through a feed-back loop effect, these mental models ... enable readers to visualize these movements within a containing space. Mental maps, in other words, are both dynamically constructed in the course of reading and consulted by the reader to orient himself [sic] in the narrative world" ("Space"). Containment and locality, under this framework, would be associated with the *restrictions* and *boundaries* of this mental map.

⁶ The genesis and history of this category/genre/approach is described by a wide gambit of scholars; see Sperling; Goodbody and Johns-Putra.

⁷ As Tobias Boes and Kate Marshall point out, the Anthropocene "is not simply something that is written about; it is also something that is actively shaped and created through acts of human inscription" (64).

introduction to a special issue of *Studies in the Novel* dedicated to cli-fi, Stef Craps and Rick Crownshaw are “wary of the emergence of a canon of climate change fiction—as a distinct and delimited genre—and [resist] its hypostatization” (1). Similarly, in her introduction to a special issue of *Paradoxa* on “climate fictions,” Alison Sperling emphasizes the importance of extending such fictions beyond the “category, genre, or sub-genre of the novel in order to open up more capacious relations between climate change and the fictive, the imaginative, the speculative, the fake or the falsified” (16). Adeline Johns-Putra and Axel Goodbody provocatively assert that climate change fiction need not be directly engaged with the “discursive object” of climate change to be considered cli-fi (231). This thesis follows these and many other scholars’ interests in broadening approaches to engagement with climate change, discussing texts that would, at first glance, seem to have little to do with the phenomenon.⁸ As consciousness about the spatiotemporal breadth and complexity of the climate crisis has grown, so too have newer, older, and ever more diverse texts and forms been brought into the folds of cli-fi.

Even more specifically, this thesis examines how an architectural space associated with Cold War nuclear panic manifests in cli-fi to create a controlled narrative relationship with climate change. This space, the fallout shelter, stabilizes life in the Anthropocene. It is a flexible figure, not only appearing in its typical concrete bunker form, but also in a variety of rhetorical, figurative, and multi-scale formats. The fallout shelter is loaded with the historical baggage of Cold War *containment culture*, which names the proliferation of exclusionary, polarizing geopolitical mentalities that suffused all levels of society as a result of the potential threat of nuclear annihilation. Cli-fi featuring this space necessarily struggles with the legacy of this culture, either passively accepting it or actively subverting it in service of creating a more inclusive, capacious framework for engaging with climate change. This thesis’s focus on the fallout shelter is motivated by three factors: the space’s historical role in containing the similar existential threat of nuclear annihilation, its metaphorical and inter-medial flexibility that helps us orient ourselves with respect to the hyperobject of climate change, and its *delusion of survival*.⁹

⁸ Generally, I agree with Timothy Clark’s assertion that almost any narrative can be read from an ecocritical perspective and can fit meaningfully into climate change discourse given responsible “scale framing” (*Ecocriticism on the Edge* 78). Jesse Oak Taylor’s ecocritical retrospection on Victorian-era literature is a good example, in which he describes how novels, regardless of the directness of their engagements with a global environment, work as “climate models” (1).

⁹ I use the term “fallout shelter” rather than the proximate terms “bunker” and “bomb shelter” in order to preserve a conceptual relationship to the ecological effects of nuclear weapons. As I will explain in the first chapter, although fallout shelters were usually designed to withstand only the toxic fallout from nuclear weapon use (not the nuclear blast), the Cold War cultural imagination gave these spaces the properties of absolute protection. Moreover, as Paul Virilio’s early study *Bunker Archaeology* suggests, bunkers were primarily associated with military efforts and were designed to withstand non-nuclear attacks, whereas fallout shelters

Analyzing recent cli-fi from the perspective of a figure of nuclear culture follows logically from Daniel Cordle's assertion that nuclear-themed texts are a "special category of climate fiction" ("Climate Criticism and Nuclear Criticism" 288). As Cordle explains, the advent of nuclear weapons developed new senses of climate and global space that persist today, "map[ping] human activity into ecosystems that transcend local and national boundaries to reveal a shared planetary vulnerability" (289). I read the fallout shelter's deployment in service of imagining climate change not as a direct engagement with nuclear concerns per se, but rather as a useful figure of nuclear memory, an inter-medial "relay station" (Rigney 350) that refracts the imperceptible features of climate change through the more familiar, culturally embedded temporality and spatiality of nuclear atrocity. The fallout shelter becomes an architectural medium through which climate change can be observed and understood in the context of a similar (and ongoing) global-scale existential threat.

The fallout shelter might seem like an obscure and not especially prolific figure through which to explore cli-fi, but a cursory glance through some popular cli-fi texts suggests that its traces are everywhere. Consider a passage from Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation*, in which the protagonist climbs a lighthouse inside the mysterious Area X to discover a space resembling a fallout shelter:

A square trapdoor measuring about four feet per side lay hidden there. The latch was set into the wood of the floor. ... I could not believe what I was staring down at, and I felt lost. The trapdoor opened onto a space about fifteen feet deep and thirty feet wide. ... No, what had me gasping for breath, what felt like a punch in the stomach as I dropped to my knees, was the huge mound that dominated the space, a kind of insane midden. I was looking at a pile of papers with hundreds of journals on top of it—just like the ones we had been issued to record our observations of Area X. ... Each, as it turned out, filled with writing. ... Can you really imagine what it was like in those first moments, peering down into that dark space, and *seeing that*? Perhaps you can. Perhaps you're staring at it now. (106)

In his articulation of the new discursive space of "weird" Anthropocene ecologies (Ulstein 71), VanderMeer uses a fallout shelter space to evoke the astounding depths of the literary archive, while reflexively positioning *Annihilation* itself as a text among the midden: the fallout shelter, for VanderMeer, is the container of any given text that might survive beyond an uncertain future. Consider further the midpoint of Cormac McCarthy's

were incorporated into the "home front" through civil defense initiatives that targeted single-family suburban homes or urban community spaces. In contrast to this approach, Bradley Garrett's expansive study of doomsday preppers positions a long history of subterranean, protective spaces under the heading of "bunker." This is understandable, as such spaces are morphologically diverse enough to demand a catch-all term. This thesis, however, is concerned with the historically specific genesis of the fallout shelter within Cold War containment culture, though much of my analysis would fit under Garrett's bunker framework.

The Road, in which a father-son duo traverses a post-apocalyptic landscape to discover a fallout shelter replete with much-needed supplies:

The man swung the door over and let it fall in the grass. Rough stairs carpentered out of two by tens leading down into the darkness. ... The bunker was walled with concrete block. A poured concrete floor laid over with kitchen tile. ... Oh my God, he whispered. Oh my God.

What is it Papa?

Come down. Oh my God. Come down.

Crate upon crate of canned goods. Tomatoes, peaches, beans, apricots. Canned hams. Corned beef. Hundreds of gallons of water in ten gallon plastic jerry jugs. Paper towels, toiletpaper, paper plates. Plastic trashbags stuffed with blankets. He held his forehead in his hand. Oh my God, he said. He looked back at the boy. It's all right, he said. Come down. (117)

In this example, the fallout shelter represents the abundance of a lost world, an artifact of survivalism belatedly fulfilling its intended purpose. It is an oasis for the characters amid the bleakness of a climate-changed (and/or post-nuclear) world, but also for contemporary readers narratively traversing one of many potential dark futures. The fallout shelter is a medium between the past of an imagined future and a narrative present, and between the contemporary literary imagination and our agency to act in order to prevent such horrific scenarios. These are just two recent notable examples; there are numerous additional ones in contemporary film, television, literary fiction, and games, not to mention a plethora of novels from the Cold War era (briefly surveyed in Chapter 1).¹⁰

This thesis asserts that the fallout shelter is not only used in cli-fi to evoke (and contain) the power of global-scale destructive forces, but also characterizes a distinct rhetorical situation in which we produce and consume narrative in the Anthropocene. This structural homology between content, form, and rhetorical situation is similar to Kate Marshall's idea of "corridority," or the self-reflexive quality of fiction that "observes its own operations" through the evocation of architectural spaces that simultaneously characterize the experience of narrative media (2). Cli-fi that features the fallout shelter has a kind of "fallout shelter-icity" that positions readers as contained subjects while depicting characters hemmed in by fallout shelter spaces. As I will explain, the experience of this homology is deeply unsettling, as it converts pleasurable literary escapism into a psychological survival tactic in the face of the climate crisis. An

¹⁰ A few recent examples include Bethesda Studios' *Fallout* game series (including a popular mobile game entitled *Fallout Shelter*); Dan Trachtenberg's film *10 Cloverfield Lane* and Régis Roinsard's *The Translators*; Brian K. Vaughan's television series *Under the Dome* and Tina Fey and Robert Carlock's web television sitcom *The Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*.

exemplum of the fallout shelter as rhetorical situation would be Katie Paterson's "Future Library," a group of texts yet to be produced that are due for release in 2114. Currently, the library exists only as a grove of one thousand trees planted in Norway, but if all goes according to plan, in a century the trees will be harvested and used as raw material to print a collection of manuscripts contributed each year by notable authors across the duration of the project (held in trust until publication). The stated goal of the Future Library bears resemblance to the justifications behind fallout shelters: the promise of and commitment to a bright future beyond an uncertain, panicky present. The fact that this project is, by any measure, considered ambitious should give us pause: *only one hundred years?* ("The Artwork").

In the interest of continuing to expand scholarly approaches to cli-fi, the texts selected for analysis in this thesis are not typical or particularly well-known examples of this emergent genre/category/approach. Each primary text, however, centers the fallout shelter space as its primary dramatic fulcrum. This strategy shows how the fallout shelter refracts climate change in places that would otherwise be overlooked by ecocritics looking for cli-fi exempla. In the spirit of Kate Marshall's critical exploration of the corridor, this thesis is organized around the *architectural* medium of the fallout shelter. As a result, this thesis is a journey through a variety of disparate narrative media, beginning with short fiction and television from the Cold War era, moving through more recent novels and films, and concluding with a graphic novel. In each case study, I show how the fallout shelter is deployed in service of a variety of different aims related to understanding climate change, including the evocation of deep temporalities, the creation and management of climatological symbolic systems, climate change class dynamics, the localization and metonymizing of narrative space, elucidation of spectacular visual ecologies, manipulations of irony, and so on. While each case study grapples with different features of life in the Anthropocene, every text I have selected positions readers or spectators as *contained subjects*. That is, they make use of the homology between the fallout shelter as it is evoked in narrative and the rhetorical situation in which we consume such narratives against the backdrop of a global-scale existential threat from which we would like to protect ourselves. As a result, the primary texts are highly reflexive, repeatedly making contact with the surfaces of their respective narrative containers to draw readers and viewers into direct tessellations of their own contained worlds.

Chapter 1, "Containment Culture and the Nuclear Sublime," provides an extended account of the fallout shelter's material and cultural genesis, positioning this space as the central figure of Cold War containment culture. As a reflex against the nuclear sublime, the fallout shelter became a racially exclusionary survival space that helped predominantly white individuals in suburban contexts grapple with the reality of large-scale destructive forces. Examining three quintessential fallout shelter narratives from across the Cold War period, I explore how narrative space gets organized around this

pronounced figure of pre-traumatic stress. Crucially, I assert that any experience of pre-trauma is *preceded* by an encounter with the sublime, an important consideration when considering the reappearance of “updated” fallout shelter spaces in more recent cli-fi texts. By establishing the main features of containment culture and how it responds to the nuclear threat, I also articulate the fundamental dynamics at work in more recent fallout shelter texts that engage with the ecologies of climate change, while introducing readers to the reflexive dynamics mentioned above.

Chapter 2, “Ecological Containment and Irony,” reformats suburban containment culture for the entertainment industrial complex, using the cultural significance attached to the Cold War fallout shelter to explore T. C. Boyle’s recent cli-fi novel *The Terranauts*, a satire of the events surrounding the construction and operation of Biosphere 2, a veritable “ecological” fallout shelter. This chapter investigates recent ecocriticism and philosophy engaged with the problem of containment, while Boyle’s novel grapples with the question of containment on spatial, intellectual, ecological, and textual levels. I develop the idea of “visual ecology,” which names the way the imaginative gaze of readers gets wrapped up in the visual dynamics associated with spectacular forms of containment. This ecology, I explain, is part of a reflexive and ironic dynamic between text and reader marked by a voyeurism destructive to imagining global environmental problems. Boyle uses the idea of containment to correct this dynamic, alerting readers to their own precarious “contained” positions with respect to climate change. Irony, Boyle demonstrates, is an invalid and shallow defense mechanism designed to escape the reflexive dynamics that are also at work in the other fallout shelter texts in this thesis. Rather than clinging to the imagined distance between reader and text, readers of Boyle’s novel experience “irony as world relation” that no longer permits escapism, but rather claustrophobically and inescapably involves readers in any given containment fantasy.

With this new critical disposition fully articulated, Chapter 3, “Fallout Shelter Cinema,” takes visual ecology as a characteristic feature of the cinematic medium to examine three post-9/11 films that center the fallout shelter in their engagements with climate change. Just as in Chapter 1, I show how the fallout shelter lends its stretchy metaphorical properties to characterize spaces and places far beyond the localized settings in each film. I begin with a discussion of David Fincher’s *Panic Room*, exploring how the film blends the post-9/11 discourse of “national security” into Robert Marzec’s notion of “natural security” in the definition of a new (environmental) American “homeland” confronted with the reality of climate change and global resource demands, a feat achieved exclusively through the setting of a New York mansion and its panic room. Turning to Jeff Nichols’ *Take Shelter*, I discuss how the “gestural homeland” of cinema creates an aesthetic vocabulary for apprehending non-scientific indicators of climate change, which are glimpsed through the boundaries of a Midwestern locality under major psychological pressure from global existential threats, causing the protagonist to expand his existing storm shelter into a space resembling a fallout shelter. Finally, I consider how Bong Joon

Ho's *Parasite* uses a fallout shelter to reveal cultural forms of containment while the local setting of a palatial home in Seoul, South Korea buckles under the pressures of American cultural imperialism. Natural security surfaces again to reveal how these issues are linked with climate change, while the film implicates passive forms of scholarship in intra-class warfare in a reflexive move akin to Boyle's indictment of "savvy criticism."

Combining the approaches used to analyze fallout shelter texts in the previous chapters, Chapter 4, "Containing Trauma," reads the sturdy box of Chris Ware's *Building Stories* as a translation of the fallout shelter into literary form. Performing a deliberately close reading of Ware's expansive (but contained) graphic novel, I explore pre-trauma in more detail, positioning it in relation to the recent historical traumas of 9/11 and nuclear atrocity. I explain how semiotic techniques characteristic of the comics medium, specifically onomatopoeia, contain and structure a relationship to the looming threat of climate change. While drawing on the imagery of Cold War fallout shelter survivalism, Ware captures the maniacal archival impulse to "save everything." I end this chapter with a brief corrective to the legacies of containment culture seen throughout each case study in the thesis, advocating for a practice of "infrastructural reading" that might bridge disparate world-models caused by the variegations of containment across different individuals.

The conclusion, "The Bully, The Billionaire, and the Invisible Man," first recaps the findings of the thesis, then addresses a few recent real-world examples of fallout shelter use by well-known political and cultural figures. As I will show in the chapters that follow, containment is necessary to life in the Anthropocene, but must sever ties with the persistent negativity associated with Cold War containment culture if it is to avoid perpetuating misery for people. While the fallout shelter may be a useful figure to organize humanity's relationship to the hyperobject of climate change, this space must transform into a communitarian, inclusive, and exceptionally capacious architectural and metaphorical form that can promote the endurance of the intricate webs of human and nonhuman life that make continued existence on this planet possible. Regrettably, against the backdrop of the emergent crises of COVID-19 and police brutality in the United States, the resurgence of interest in the Black Lives Matter movement has been briefly linked the with the fallout shelter in a grand-scale continuation and re-articulation of containment culture that is rapidly devolving into a pseudo-theocratic fascist state (which can only devolve further into eco-fascism). Meanwhile, the global billionaire class seeks a cosmic fallout shelter that might provide refuge from the miseries of planet Earth in what I call a "White Flight to the Red Planet." I end with a brief meditation on Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, which is narrated from an urban subterranean space resembling a fallout shelter, but from the other side of containment culture's racially exclusionary boundaries. In response to the exclusionary principles revealed by the fallout shelter texts in this thesis, I assert that connection and community (rather

than separation, isolation, and individualism) are the only valid aims in the face of climate change, and indeed might forestall the worst of what awaits humanity.

Chapter 1

Containment Culture and the Nuclear Sublime

In a scene from Rod Serling's and Lamont Johnson's 1961 television episode of *The Twilight Zone* entitled "The Shelter," Grace, William, and their son Paul descend into their suburban home's fallout shelter following a radio announcement of an imminent nuclear strike. Grace, overcome with the reality of their family's inability to survive the attack beyond the limited time and space provided by the shelter, summarizes their likely fate while William looks on: "We'll get it," she agonizes, "the poison, the radiation, the whole mess" (Figure 2).

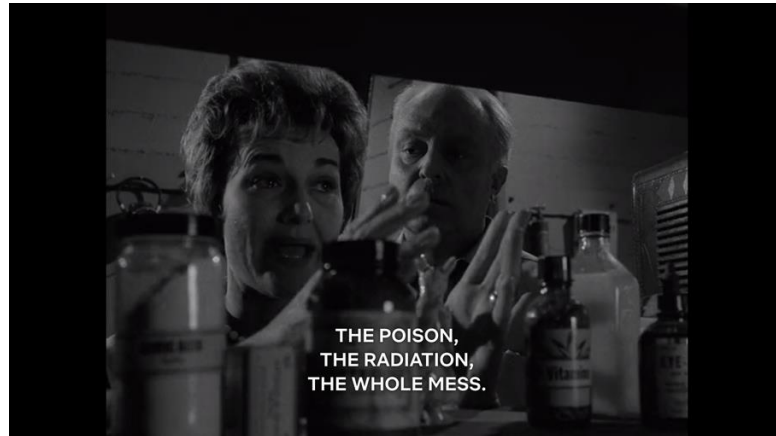


Figure 2 Rod Serling and Lamont Johnson, "The Shelter." Grace and William agonize.

The restricted visual field of Grace and William, whose faces are boxed in by a shelf carrying a collection of survival provisions within the confined space of the shelter, is contrasted with the magnitude of the destruction Grace believes is about to occur. Grace fears not only the nuclear blast, but also contamination by the invisible, microscopic force of radiation: her nuclear panic gets stretched across multiple scales while the family's plight gets magnified by the confined setting of the shelter. At the same time, Grace and William have forsaken the other families in their suburban community who lack shelters to endure the nuclear apocalypse on the outside. Fortunately, the announcement turns out to be a false alarm, but what seems to be impending disaster becomes a social,

environmental, and existential catastrophe for the characters that, at the time of the episode's broadcast, would have seemed all too possible for predominantly white viewing audiences who had only recently emerged from World War II, were still coming to terms with the atrocities in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, were in the midst of a pronounced civil defense mania, and would experience the Cuban Missile Crisis only a year after the episode's broadcast.

"The Shelter" is but one of many narrative responses to the advent of the nuclear. But cultural and material manifestations of the fallout shelter space during the Cold War took into account much more than the possibility of nuclear annihilation. It was a primary figure of *containment culture*: a sociopolitical development in the United States working against the perceived threat of communism in addition to the dangers of nuclear weapons. Within containment culture, the fallout shelter became a racially exclusionary space designed to produce and maintain white, patriarchal suburban localities that could easily translate to the space and place of the nation while designating the white body as the primary site where supposedly invisible forces—whether social, environmental, or spatial—could be registered as dangerous contaminants. The fallout shelter and its associations with containment also appear to be a manifestation of what E. Ann Kaplan and Paul K. Saint-Amour have termed "pre-trauma" (28), a psychological condition marked by a premonitory sense of unease associated with a climate of what Saint-Amour calls "perpetual interwar" (33). While Kaplan focuses her discussion of pre-trauma mainly on contemporary anxieties surrounding climate change, it is a useful concept for understanding perpetual interwar cultural responses to the terror of the nuclear within containment culture. If the experience of a kind of trauma can be linked with the imagination, production, and occupation of the fallout shelter, it is also important to consider the ways in which this trauma gets distributed among the other (anti)social, spatial, and environmental channels associated with this space. Because containment culture was so invested in the dynamics between different spatial frames, and how these frames of reference informed nuclear and environmental reality, any conception of pre-trauma as articulated through the fallout shelter must also take these dynamics into account.

First, this chapter explores the genesis of containment culture and the creation of the fallout shelter, understanding this figure primarily as a pre-traumatic, survivalist response to the nuclear sublime cascading into other social anxieties within the dominant culture. Then I offer readings of three quintessential fallout shelter narratives that exemplify the production of white localities and national identity, confrontation with global systems, and resistance to and containment of nuclear and ecological modalities of the sublime: John Cheever's short story "The Brigadier and the Golf Widow," the *Twilight Zone* television episode entitled "The Shelter," and *The Nuclear Age* by Tim O'Brien. Each of these texts demonstrates how the nuclear sublime and its fallout shelter reflex exert localizing pressure on narrative space, while simultaneously referencing a global

geopolitical context that scales up the significance of social anxieties articulated within those spaces. Confronted with the Kantian “formlessness” of the sublime at both microscopic and planetary scales (Shaw 117), these texts seek to re-anchor human experience into the comparatively stable space of the fallout shelter, which then converts to a pronounced figure of pre-traumatic stress. In other words, an encounter with the sublime *precedes* the experience of pre-trauma, an important consideration when this disorder reappears in contemporary climate change fiction in relation to “updated” fallout shelter spaces.

1.1 The Nuclear Sublime

With their capacity to radically alter landscapes and poison ecosystems far into the future, nuclear weapons and their possible use dominated cultural imagination in the United States during the Cold War, as is described in Paul Boyer’s *By the Bomb’s Early Light* (1985), a detailed account of these weapons’ cultural impact. Boyer discovered in producing the study that “the bomb’s corrosive impact on the externals of life pale[d] in comparison to its effect on the interior realm of consciousness and memory” (xix), going on to examine how his own psyche was shaped by such weapons:

If even a superficial exploration of [my] nuclear consciousness led in so many unexpected directions, how could I possibly presume to discuss the impact of the bomb on an entire culture? Would not a history of ‘nuclear’ thought and culture become indistinguishable from a history of all contemporary thought and culture?
(xx)

Boyer subsequently emphasizes that, in his search for evidence of the cultural impact of the nuclear blast, “the problem was not finding material, but deciding when to turn off the tap” (xxi). Boyer grappled with intellectual containment: not only did the bomb have a physical magnitude that defied understanding, but its impacts on culture were just as difficult to measure and contain. Written only slightly earlier, Jonathan Schell’s *The Fate of the Earth* (1982) vividly imagines the consequences of nuclear weapon use, exhibiting a similar difficulty in bounding such weapons’ possible effects, describing them as “a pit into which the whole world can fall—a nemesis of all human intentions, actions, and hopes. Only life itself, which they threaten to swallow up, can give the measure of their significance” (3). Nuclear weapons are overwhelming and all-pervasive, demanding an impossible measuring stick—“life itself”—to capture the scale of their physical and cultural impacts.

These pronouncements by Boyer and Schell are made clearer when we consider the work of Peter Hales, Frances Ferguson, and Rob Wilson, who each found the nuclear blast, with its “absolute magnitude” and “near-infinite power,” to be a version of the sublime: “a phenomenon that set it apart from all that had preceded it, even as it demanded some means by which that infinitude could be harnessed and made comprehensible” (Hales 9). These scholars’ fascination with the nuclear sublime can be attributed to a conference at Cornell University, during which Jacques Derrida gave a paper entitled “No Apocalypse, Not Now (Seven Missiles, Seven Missives),” which was later published as the keystone essay in a 1984 issue of *Diacritics* dedicated to nuclear criticism (of which Ferguson is also a part). This issue, published toward the end of the Cold War, became the theoretical foundation for the field of nuclear criticism, generating a wealth of scholarship on nuclear topics until the end of the Cold War in 1991. The sublime offered, at that time, a suitable preexisting theoretical frame within which to engage with the nuclear. As traditionally theorized, the sublime emerges in an encounter with entities of such force and scale that they overwhelm and defeat the experiencing subject, leaving in their wake comparatively feeble representations that offer only a glimpse of the original sublime object (Shaw 3). The sublime evokes a sense of wonder and beauty but also terror, marked by a failure of representation (Shaw 3) and helplessness (Shaw 80). Immanuel Kant distinguished between the “mathematical” and the “dynamical” sublime: the former refers to a confrontation with magnitudes that exceed the capacity of human imagination that the faculty of reason then tries to contain or, to use Hales’ word, “harness” (in the concept of infinity, for example); the latter, often the result of an encounter with nature, “is a source of delight...because it is contemplated from afar” even though it causes terror and weakness (Shaw 82). In each case, there is a separation and distance between the sublime object and its secondary representation, or the expressive aftereffect of an encounter with the sublime which can only ever offer a comparatively weak impression.

Hales, Ferguson, and Wilson distill conventional understandings of the sublime into the “atomic” or “nuclear” sublime. Because nuclear weapons are both manmade and a product of the forces of nature (Hales 10), the tidy separation between nature and the cognizant spectator of Kant’s dynamical sublime breaks down; similarly, the mathematical sublime of the nuclear blast is not secondarily contained through the faculty of reason but instead can be reproduced through the use of the weapons themselves: the sublime effect and its literal representation are one and the same. Hales, Ferguson, and Wilson differ, however, in the way they see broader culture responding to the “mingled awe and terror of a thermonuclear force” (Wilson 408). Hales eschews Burkean “self-eradication” and Kantian integration with reason, instead privileging the conversion of “terror to tourism...holocaust to parlor show” (12). In other words, the sublime was quelled through an aesthetic experience embedded in the American traditions of “nature-worship, patriotism, and religious righteousness” that represented nuclear weapons as the “benign collaboration among man, nature and divinity that had

defined American destiny, a predetermined, even foreordained event” (13). Ferguson, on the other hand, dwells on the impossibility of contemplating existence after nuclear annihilation. According to Ferguson, this kind of sublimity—of trying to think of life beyond death—does not get contained in an aesthetic experience, but instead becomes a de-aestheticized monstrosity consisting of “calculations of exactly how horrible daily life would be after a significant nuclear explosion.” For Ferguson, the possibility of complete annihilation refigures everyday life, charged with a survivalist mentality, as the only panacea (7).¹ Wilson, in a different vein, examines various responses to the nuclear sublime in postmodern poetry, calling the nuclear sublime an “end-game genre” that demands “all our collective resources of language” if we are to survive in intellectual proximity to it (416).

The nuclear sublime offers one avenue through which to understand the genesis of pre-traumatic stress disorder, which in the context of Cold War America manifested through containment culture in a manner much broader than described by Kaplan in more recent contexts. The repression and management of the nuclear sublime through language and survivalist defensive impulses, as described by Hales, Ferguson, and Wilson, are all forms of containment culture. Initially seen at the level of foreign policy toward the communist, nuclearized Soviet Union, containment gained cultural significance as its guiding premises replicated at local levels, particularly in relation to family structures and domestic life in suburban contexts. As first articulated by the U.S. diplomat and historian George Kennan, containment’s primary aim was “to protect the security of the nation, by which is meant the continued ability of [the United States] to pursue the development of its internal life without serious interference, or threat of interference, from foreign powers” (Gaddis 26). More specifically, containment was the “rigid major premise that the world was divided into two monolithic camps, one dedicated to promoting the inextricable combination of capitalism, democracy, and (Judeo-Christian) religion, and one seeking to destroy that ideological amalgamation by any means,” especially through the spread of communism and, obviously, the use of nuclear weapons (Nadel 3). In turn, these political mentalities scaled down to local levels and pervaded the immediate psychosocial environment of the nuclear family as a pronounced form of pre-traumatic stress. Containment upheld distinctions between foreign and domestic, inside and outside, and same and other, and became mapped onto a multitude of global and local relations working to come to terms with the perceived threat of communism, the advent of nuclear weapons, and the sublime possibility of annihilation.

¹ In this sense, there is an intersection between Hales’ and Ferguson’s containments of the nuclear sublime: Hales finds his evidence of nuclear aestheticization in the publications that comprised the “everyday” consumption of Cold War readers, *Life* magazine and *National Geographic*.

Containment culture, as both an extension of containment as a foreign policy and a new sociocultural paradigm that continued to authenticate its political dimensions, exacerbated preexisting social anxieties with similarly polarized factions, particularly in regard to race relations. David Monteyne's study explores the production of fallout shelters, which were designed not only to "counteract the awesome, though little understood, power of atomic weapons" (xix), but also to uphold the power of the white, patriarchal nuclear family that, when integrated with the identity of the nation, created a fictitious sense of collective political consensus by means of repressing those outside this social template (34, 196). Nadel, in line with Monteyne, Ferguson, Hales, and Wilson, links containment with the need to control anxieties associated with nuclear weapons, which manifested in numerous social malignancies such as xenophobia and religious exclusionism. Nadel's study also tracks containment's role in the dynamics between men and women, as well as the positionality of queer identities "contained" by the proverbial closet. Nadel links these sexual dynamics with the rhetorical function of containment, which "foreclose[d] dissent, preempt[ed] dialogue, and preclude[d] contradiction" (14), presumably by anyone who was not a white, heterosexual man operating within the nuclear family unit. All relations were, in some sense, subsumed by nuclear consciousness and, by extension, psychological management of a particularly horrifying awareness of the sublime, demanding an equally powerful and pervasive cultural response that could contain the possibility that destruction might come to pass for the dominant social order.

The fallout shelter was, perhaps, the figure most emblematic of containment culture. In a government-backed plan for civil defense led by Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the fallout shelter proliferated throughout the United States as a widespread architectural response to the explosive end of World War II. "Fallout shelter" refers to any space either designed with or already possessing the qualities necessary for defense against radioactive fallout produced by the distant detonation of a nuclear weapon, though as David Monteyne observes in his study of the space, during the Cold War (and today) fallout shelters were often conflated with blast shelters and military bunkers, which were theoretically possible to manufacture for home use but not as practical nor as widely deployable as fallout shelters (46). In any case, the morphology of fallout shelters varied: as Monteyne documents, thousands of public buildings were peppered with the iconic "fallout shelter" signs designating them as survival spaces, signs that only recently have begun to be removed by authorities on account of the buildings' protective obsolescence (Allen). Moreover, a cursory glance at fallout shelter patents from the Cold War era and beyond suggests the space came in many dynamic and modular formats. Nevertheless, stories like "The Shelter" popularized the unitized, family-owned, suburban fallout shelter loaded with survival provisions, often with only one entry point, as the site of final resistance to nuclear atrocity.

As such, the fallout shelter became a key space and symbol in and around which individuals, families, and communities² negotiated their identities and futures against the possibility of nuclear annihilation. As Monteyne notes, civil defense initiatives like the fallout shelter program were “largely rhetorical, a locus of meaning in the Cold War, where U.S. citizens could understand and become comfortable with their roles in the global conflict” (47). The fallout shelter became, in every sense, a figure of containment, solidifying the composition and privileged status of the white, heterosexual nuclear family while providing false assurance that, in the event of a nuclear blast, a positive outcome was possible for those who subscribed to its isolationist (and profoundly racist) social logic, demonstrated by the largely white-centered “imagineering” of the program by architects and civil defense planners (Monteyne 21). Later, it was determined that fallout shelters provided little actual protection from a nuclear blast, and only guaranteed a finite duration of survival in the presence of toxic fallout (Monteyne xix) due to the certainty of ecosystem collapse (Schell 65). Thus, the fallout shelter became a space of denial and repression, and a powerful conduit for social, political, and intellectual forces to exert their influence over the imaginations of the American populace. The fallout shelter both conjured and repressed the global-scale terror of the nuclear while minimizing it into the suburban landscapes of everyday life, concentrating the forces of international politics, survival, property relations, sexuality, surveillance, and social paranoia into a single nuclearized space. In a departure from the traditional semiotics of the sublime, in which any given encounter prompts the impulse to *harness* its magnitudes through aesthetic form, the fallout shelter was a symbol that might *resist* or *forestall* another encounter with the sublimity of the mushroom cloud.

The planning, production, and distribution of material and symbolic fallout shelter culture is discussed at length in studies by Monteyne and Kenneth Rose. Monteyne’s book explores the cooperative relationship between the government and architectural organizations that deployed fallout shelters both as newly constructed spaces and as integrations with preexisting buildings, finding in this widespread civil defense initiative “material lessons and landscapes for a ‘society of modulation’” (xix) planned by “the white male subjectivities of architects” that ultimately designated “the white male ... as the most necessary survivor” (33). Monteyne notes that, through the fallout shelter and similar spaces designed for defense against a nuclear attack, “Cold War experts and government officials hoped to maintain the status quo both before and after an attack, making sure that class, gender, and racial hierarchies continued to operate in the spaces of the nation” (19). Rose’s work details the political conditions surrounding the

² Particularly as “imagined communities,” to use Benedict Anderson’s terminology that indicates the way individuals form a sense of national collectivity even though “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them” (6).

deployment of the fallout shelter program, demonstrating it to be culturally pervasive even as heated public debate questioned its efficacy. Rose's account situates the fallout shelter's genesis within the survivalist mentality dominating institutions wrapped up in Cold War politics, but only touches on the intersections with social inequality that Monteyne more directly articulates. Rose concludes that although fallout shelters were rarely ever actually built by individual families on account of the cost, the figure nevertheless captured the imaginations of national and local governments, cities, communities, and families in the early stages of the Cold War. As Rose summarizes, "the fallout shelter prompted a debate on all levels of society over nuclear war and survival" (213).

Although buildings in urban environments were plastered with "fallout shelter" signs in spaces deemed suitable for protection (Monteyne 42), suburbia was the primary target for the fallout shelter program (Seed 50). Suburban environments, which boomed in response to the rapid demand for housing in the postwar period and the "white flight" of millions from urban areas who wanted "a piece of the 'good life'" (Grossman 77), were initially refuges for privileged white families in a time when African Americans were demanding and claiming their long-denied civil rights. The possibility of owning an exclusive fallout shelter on a suburban slice of land was an attractive option for those who feared the legal necessity of racial integration in more collective urban fallout shelters (Grossman 93), for, at this time, schools had yet to be (and in many areas in the United States today, are still not) integrated. Containment culture, isolated with respect to the suburban environment, consequentially became infused with racial panic.

Containment culture extended, of course, into the literary realm as well. From the perspective of "nuclear criticism," a minor but influential critical enterprise beginning in the 80s, Derrida famously declared nuclear weapons to be "fabulously textual" because, as Cordle explains, "global nuclear war is itself an entirely virtual construction that is accessible *only* through fictions of various kinds" ("Cultures of Terror" 1188). Nuclear containment in fiction is well catalogued by Paul Brians, who charts the emergence of nuclear-themed fiction in an extensive bibliography, dividing such fictions into two broad categories: "those depicting a conflict and its immediate consequences, and those set in the more distant future, long after the war has taken place" (54). David Dowling, too, devotes a volume of similar scope to nuclear-themed literature, finding in certain texts the creation of and response to a "climate of disaster" (6). Specific focus on the fallout shelter's appearance in fiction, however, is less pronounced. Rose devotes several pages to this subject, but performs little analysis beyond the summary required to integrate these appearances with his sociopolitical historiography of the figure. David Seed devotes a chapter in his study to literary debates surrounding "nuclear refuge," profiling a selection of texts that occasionally included the fallout shelter. Each of these studies points to several notable works from the Cold War period that thematize the fallout shelter in their engagements with nuclear conflict: Walter M. Miller Jr.'s *A Canticle*

for Leibowitz (1959), *Level 7* (1959) by Mordecai Roshwald, Kobo Abe's *The Ark Sakura* (1984), Robert A. Heinlein's *Farnham's Freehold* (1964), *Tomorrow!* (1954) and *Triumph* (1963) by Philip Wylie, Tim O'Brien's *The Nuclear Age* (1981), John Cheever's short story "The Brigadier and the Golf Widow" (1961), and Stanley Kubrick's film *Dr. Strangelove* (1964).

Narratives that feature the fallout shelter are typically discussed in terms of the containment cultures linked to international politics, sexuality, and survival; however, Daniel Cordle's cautious integration of postwar nuclear literature with the much later advent of climate change fiction opens up new potential avenues of inquiry that are the main focus of this thesis. Cordle isolates, among other commonalities between such texts, the breach of *spatial* containment associated with each genre's respective catastrophes:

Nuclear consequences, like climate changes, cannot be conveniently contained ... Such failures of containment recur frequently in nuclear texts. Nuclear technologies are mapped in the cultural imagination as breaking beyond the localities in which they originate (in some cases, detonate) to interact with, and enter into, larger systems ... The local site is part of, and traversed by systems from, the world outside. ("Climate Criticism and Nuclear Criticism" 290)

Widening the concept beyond its political associations, and sidestepping its implications for social life in the domestic sphere, Cordle uses "containment" to reference the uncertain boundary between local and global, between simple and complex systems as they relate to the overlap of environmental and nuclear concerns. These navigations of scale are mapped according to insides and outsides, and with use of the verb "breaking" are given a sense of physicality that we might associate with the physical impacts that a space like the fallout shelter was imagined to be able to withstand. Elsewhere, Cordle summarizes these scale dynamics in terms of nuclear anxiety, presenting the possibility of their metaphorical slippage into other domains:

A 'containment culture' effectively connected microcosmic, domestic to macrocosmic, geopolitical realms such that preoccupations in one were metamorphosed into new forms in the other. Nuclear anxieties were thus blurred, morphing into forms not immediately identifiable as nuclear and also functioning as metaphors for other social anxieties. (*States of Suspense* 27)

Thus, as a distinctly material and architectural figure of containment culture, the fallout shelter not only managed the nuclear sublime and its various cascades into American culture, but also serves as a tracking tool to understand how nuclear anxieties were superimposed and interlaced with the space and place of a new environmental consciousness fixated on the threat of contamination.

Neither Monteyne's nor Rose's study of the fallout shelter addresses the shifts in environmental consciousness associated with awareness of the effects of toxic fallout. For, at the same time that nuclear anxiety solidified its grip on the United States and

prompted the racist, xenophobic “imagineering” of fallout shelters (Monteyne 21), Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring* in 1962, roughly the same time that fallout shelter culture reached its apogee, especially for those in the business of selling them (Bishop 1). Through text and television (Kroll 412), Carson raised awareness of the microscopic world in which toxic pesticides, as well as radioactive fallout, could move through ecosystems and human bodies invisibly, standing in contrast to the sublimely large and comparatively obvious dangers of a nuclear blast. Ralph Lutts observes the overlap of this kind of ecological awareness with nuclear consciousness:

[Carson] was sounding an alarm about a kind of pollution that was invisible to the senses; could be transported great distances, perhaps globally; could accumulate over time in body tissues; could produce chronic as well as acute poisoning; and could result in cancer, birth defects and genetic mutations that may not become evident until years or decades after exposure. ... Chemical pesticides were not the only form of pollution fitting this description. Another form, far better known to the public at the time, was radioactive fallout. (212)

As Cordle explains, quoting Joseph Masco, this “potential [for] physiological contamination” is one aspect of Masco’s “nuclear uncanny,” in which “sensory experience becomes haunted and untrustworthy” on account of the “disruption of ‘the ability of individuals to differentiate their bodies from the environment’” (“Climate Criticism and Nuclear Criticism” 289). However, as Lutts indicates above, what actually constituted one’s environment was taking on new, possibly global dimensions, so this bodily differentiation occurred at uncertain scales. Thus, not only did the fallout shelter contain large-scale nuclear anxiety, it also upheld the spatial and physiological integrity of the human body amid its newfound small-scale permeability by a toxin with global reach. Insofar as the fallout shelter functioned as a space of denial and repression, so too did it symbolically foreclose the world of microscopic but expansive ecologies as potential vectors of contamination, thereby suspending experience in a locality demarcated on all sides by danger—of the large, the small, the foreign, and the nonwhite.

The literature of the fallout shelter, in its fixation on survival and obsession with white identity, responds to and upholds the various containments of the nuclear sublime. If early deployments of the fallout shelter localized the intersection between containment culture, understood as a social, political, and intellectual response to the nuclear sublime, and a new environmental consciousness fixated on the protection of mainly white, heterosexual bodies against social and environmental contamination, the critical work that needs doing is to examine how fallout shelter narratives produce this locality in and against the nuclear sublime while distinguishing simple from complex systems. Defining these spatial and cultural limits of containment with regard to the fallout shelter also sketches its failures, the fracture lines that might offer new avenues through which to traverse contemporary literary, cinematic, and graphic responses to the environmental

crisis, particularly when those responses feature a recapitulation of the fallout shelter figure.

Of course, as Cordle points out, nuclear devastation and its attendant toxicities are only a subset of our contemporary climate crisis, the primary concerns of which extend far beyond the consequences of nuclear proliferation. One way of expressing and understanding the overlaps between nuclear and ecological spaces is to observe how renderings of containment in nuclear texts respond to a related modality of the sublime: what Christopher Hitt has recently termed the “ecological” sublime. This variant is concerned with how “the unfathomable otherness of nature unnerves us, and the idea that we are somehow part of this alien entity shocks us. Hence we devise ways to circumvent, deny, escape, or overcome it” (611). The nuclear sublime is itself a consequence of the containing impulse with respect to the ecological sublime. The nuclear sublime is produced through an attempted intervention into the properties of the natural world to produce explosive power and control over the workings of the globe. In the ecological sublime, human agency is basically absent, but is still confronted with a force profound enough to escape intellectual and physical mastery. According to Hitt, this tendency toward containment with respect to the ecological sublime must be resisted if we are to avoid the all-too-familiar anthropocentric authentications for destroying the environment (as we see with the development of nuclear weapons). Instead of containment, Hitt contends that the ecological sublime necessitates a kind of failure of reason, whereby the subject “preserv[es] the radical alterity of nature while resisting its objectification or reification” (613), resulting in the “instability, indeterminacy, and opacity of language” (617). It follows that the stress and failure points of containment culture, insofar as they can be identified in language and narrative, are also the zones in which this relation to the ecological sublime might be observed.

This chapter examines three quintessential fallout shelter narratives that, compared to other narrative output during this period, most clearly depict the fallout shelter space in terms of containment culture and pre-traumatic stress associated with the nuclear sublime. John Cheever’s 1961 short story “The Brigadier and the Golf Widow” circumscribes the internal social dynamics of a sequestered suburban world around one family’s recent purchase of a fallout shelter, which protrudes awkwardly from the landscape in the liminal space between two properties. The shelter, which becomes the silently acknowledged focus of the community, suffuses the characters’ worlds with nuclear anxiety and a sense of impending catastrophe, or pre-trauma, even as the rhythms of everyday life remain seemingly undisturbed. The story’s fascination with landscape, the body, boundaries, fields of vision, symbolic exchange, and mediated communication makes it valuable for understanding spatial and cultural forms of containment, but also exemplifies the complex dynamics joining nuclear and ecological space. Next, I read an episode of *The Twilight Zone* entitled “The Shelter” in which a single fallout shelter in a suburban community becomes a site of racist, xenophobic, and

nationalistic conflict following the radio announcement of a potential nuclear attack. Finally, I focus on Tim O'Brien's 1981 novel *The Nuclear Age*, in which the protagonist and narrator William Cowling suffers from a pronounced form of pre-trauma, prompting him to become obsessed with fallout shelters throughout his life, building one as an adult in his backyard to the peril of his (white, nuclear) family. Though published after the heyday of civil defense mania, O'Brien's novel superimposes nuclear pre-trauma with global environmental visions, anticipating the ways in which the nuclear sublime gets repressed and reworked along ecological axes, similarly to Jeff Nichols' film *Take Shelter*, which I discuss in Chapter 3.

In order to triangulate the operations of containment in these texts, and to make analysis more manageable, I explore the fallout shelter in terms of three connected registers of narrative action: access, ownership, and exchange. Moments where these forces occur or come into question are also points where the limits and fractures of containment can be observed. In particular, I examine "sublime exchanges"—transactions involving key objects or spaces tied to fallout shelters that traverse an intersubjective, multi-scale realm in which containment fails—to show how sublime forces permeate, drive, and shape each narrative, forming the contained Cold War nuclear environment and what might exist beyond (or already within) its limits.

1.2 Accessing Immunity

Variants of American suburbia form the primary settings of each text I analyze in this chapter. According to John Archer, suburban zones were composed of mostly homogenized, single-family dwelling spaces where the so-called "American Dream" could be attempted and performed in an individualistic manner far outside the congestion and personal restraints associated with urban centers at the time. The American Dream, Archer contends, was "animated" by the desire to *escape* the "corruption of urban life," to pursue elevated *status* and social advancement, and to achieve personal *fulfillment* (253), all manifesting in the culturally reinforced notion of the "dream home." Suburbia became the "terrain of choice" for these aims to be realized (254), but in reality, suburban neighborhoods fostered only the "conflicting demands and expectations of postwar culture" (or containment culture), magnified by the American Dream's largely unfulfillable promises (257).

Robert Beuka's compelling study of suburban landscapes in twentieth-century fiction contends that suburbia was a complex form of containment culture that developed rapidly in the postwar era and contributed to "a proliferating sense of placelessness" and "the perceived homogenization of American life" (2). Although Beuka does not mention

containment explicitly, his focus on how suburbia was a “both utopian and exclusionary” space that led to “a heightened valorization of the nuclear family and consequent reification of gender identities” (2) would seem to align this environment with its principles. Citing Foucault, Beuka argues that postwar suburbia was a “heterotopic” environment that mirrored anxieties and aspirations of the culture at large (7); it follows that the “landscape of the mind” that he finds in this topography is embedded in and produced by containment culture. In his introduction of John Cheever’s fiction as an example of the complexities of suburban life, Beuka finds it

notable for its class-bound consistency, a world whose boundaries are marked by ubiquitous cocktail parties, swimming pools, and commuter trains. ... [but] beneath the veneer of his bourgeois universe, Cheever consistently draws attention to the fractures that compromise the structure of a seemingly placid suburban society. (69)

By describing class-based social relations, landscape features of private property, and mechanisms of transit as the “structure” and “boundaries” of Cheever’s suburbia, Beuka spatializes such worlds within the logic of containment culture. Importantly, Beuka involves sociality, property, and movement in the narrative production of a particular kind of local space, an operation that channels the spirit of Henri Lefebvre’s and Arjun Appadurai’s investigations on these matters, both of whom found social processes to be instrumental in the production of space (Lefebvre 40) and a sense of locality (Appadurai 180). While Beuka does not comment extensively on the whiteness of the midcentury American suburbia depicted in many of Cheever’s stories, these environments were undeniably racially exclusionary even if they lacked overt references to whiteness. As Adrienne Brown observes, “Cheever’s decision to not remark on the physical whiteness of most of his characters doesn’t mean that whiteness goes unmarked within the text” (59).

Suburban spatial, cultural, and racial boundaries are established from the outset of Cheever’s story “The Brigadier and the Golf Widow” through the figure of a fallout shelter. The story begins with an unnamed frame narrator grappling with the shelter’s awkward integration into the manufactured suburban landscape comprising his field of vision:

I would not want to be one of those writers who begin each morning exclaiming, “O Gogol, O Chekhov, O Thackeray and Dickens, what would you have made of a bomb shelter ornamented with four plaster-of-Paris ducks, a birdbath, and three composition gnomes with long beards and red mobcaps?” As I say, I wouldn’t want to begin a day like this, but I often wonder what the dead would have done. But the shelter is as much a part of my landscape as the beech and horse-chestnut trees that grow on the ridge. I can see it from this window where I write. It was built by the

Pasterns, and stands on the acre of ground that adjoins our property. It bulks under a veil of thin, new grass, like some embarrassing fact of physicalness. (599)

The narrator spatializes the scene through *ownership*: under the heading of “my landscape,” the suburban environment is simultaneously evoked and controlled (while the possibility of any communitarian forms of property relations is negated); the shelter’s position is described in relation to property lines; and the narrator rhetorically establishes ownership over the story and the space of the page through the phrase “this window where I write.”³ There is also a register of *access*: the narrator refracts the interpretation of the environment and the ensuing story through a truncated canon of white, male writers who comprise “the dead” of literary history to the exclusion of other identities. The inclusion of a frame narrator also creates an *exchange* for the story of the Pasterns between this narrator and the reading audience. These forces of ownership, access, and exchange work to produce a distinct locality—a racially exclusive narrative container—centered around the fallout shelter space, itself a symbolic containment of the nuclear sublime. Simultaneously, by writing the shelter into the landscape, the narrator keeps the ecological sublime—and all of its nonhuman otherness—at a comfortable distance.⁴

As the frame narrator recedes and blends into an omniscient perspective, the Pastern family comes into the narrative foreground. Mr. Pastern is a man beset by financial difficulties and consumed by the possibility of nuclear war, an anxiety stoked alternately by the television (603) and newspaper (612) reportage that forms his sense of the outside world, and also explains the purchase of the \$30,000 fallout shelter described in the story’s opening. Dissatisfied with his marriage to Mrs. Pastern, who constantly “[grinds] an ax of self-esteem” on whomever will listen (599), Mr. Pastern has an affair with one of the neighbors, Mrs. Flannagan. At first, the affair seems to proceed out of mutual loneliness, as Mr. Flannagan is constantly away for work; but as the story unfolds, the affair is revealed to be Mrs. Flannagan’s calculated plan to get Mr. Pastern to exchange the key to his fallout shelter for the sexual intimacy he craves from her. Though Mrs. Pastern is aware of her husband’s infidelities, she remains married to him, a fact reported

³ The passage exemplifies what Timothy Morton has called “ecomimesis,” a rhetorical “authenticating device” in which a text evokes the space and place of a particular environment, coding nature as a surrounding medium in which one is embedded, particularly through the words “as I write” or a similar phrase (33). According to Morton, ecomimesis represents an encounter with a kind of containment associated with language: the narrator tries to “exit” from writing directly into the environment, but in so doing installs the necessity of further writing (30).

⁴ As Denis Cosgrove observes, “[U]se of landscape implies, precisely, observation by an individual, in critical respects removed from it. ...[I]n landscape we are offered an important element of personal *control* over the external world” (18, emphasis in original).

by the frame narrator, who returns at the end of the tale to explain the ultimate financial downfall of the Pasterns.

The principal setting in Cheever's story is clearly a contained suburban locality, identifiable by the presence of the fallout shelter, which, as mentioned previously, was primarily a suburban phenomenon. The story's locational and spatial cues (momentarily separated from their imbrication with cultural practices and relations) evoke an isolated "storyworld" separated from places coded as external (James xi). Cheever accomplishes this by withholding a place name for the internal setting where narrative action occurs (with the exception of a fictional golf course mentioned in passing), while regularly positioning this environment in relation to named metropolises or countries. For example, the narrator introduces Mr. Pastern by describing his role as the "brigadier" of his local golf club, explaining how he regularly

was marching up and down the locker room of the Grassy Brae Golf Club shouting, "Bomb Cuba! Bomb Berlin! Let's throw a little nuclear hardware at them and show them who's boss." He ... at one time or another declared war on Russia, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and China. (599)

Elsewhere in the story, Mr. Flannagan is described as traveling all over the world in the manufacture of plastic tongue depressors, but is "away" throughout the story (602); Mrs. Flannagan's forays outside of the setting (to Tokyo, for example) are brief and fraught with cultural friction, and are only mentioned in passing by the narrator (602); the setting is vaguely described as "the country" near New York ("safer in case of war," according to Mr. Flannagan) (602); and Mr. Pastern is described as having money dangerously tied up in business in Ohio and Nassau (603). Relationally speaking, these mentions of specific external places shrink the story's setting but intensify the action that occurs within it: it is subsumed by external senses of place, but an internal, concentrated placelessness inflects the story's action. It is, in some respects, a narrative "non-place," to borrow Marc Augé's term indicating "imaginary places: banal utopias, clichés" (95).⁵

This locality of the suburb is reinforced by the positionality of the frame narrator, who begins the story "inside" this environment but, at its conclusion, mentions that he or she has moved, undetectably, "outside" to Kitzbühel, Austria (613). This rather sudden spatial and temporal misalignment of the narrator—who completes movement to this position despite the initial ecomimetic rhetoric blending his or her immediate point of view centered on the fallout shelter into the third-person omniscient perspective on the characters—installs a boundary around the world of the Pasterns, suggesting there is a

⁵ Mr. Pastern does, however, conduct some of his affair with Mrs. Flannagan in the context of an unnamed city, presumably New York, but Cheever positions this environment as a function of the social logics governing existence in the suburb, and this setting is little more than a temporary backdrop against which the affair can proceed in secrecy.

space and time that moves externally and invisibly to its containment. This misalignment also instigates a shift in perspective on the initial setting, as the fate of the characters and the fallout shelter is only related by a letter from the narrator's mother, who resides in the Pasterns' suburb. Before quoting the letter at length, the narrator muses, "We travel with such velocity these days that the most we can do is to remember a few place names. The freight of metaphysical speculation will have to catch up with us by slow train, if it catches up with us at all" (613). Narrative access to the suburb gets newly configured through the "slow train" of the letter, which tells of the Pasterns' ultimate financial downfall and exit from the community, as well as the divorce of the Flannagans. Mrs. Flannagan returns to the suburb to glimpse the fallout shelter once again, until she is shooed away by the anonymous new owners of the Pasterns' former property.

The spatial/cultural limits of the suburban setting can also be understood, as Beuka indicated, through the way Cheever renders its internal social practices and property relations. Containment, as both a metaphor describing a Cold War cultural paradigm and, more literally, the demarcations and boundaries of a distinct locality, is produced through these dynamics. In an early scene, for example, Mrs. Pastern collects money for charity from families in her proximity, further establishing the internal setting of the community and the social methods by which it can be accessed:

Leaving her house one late afternoon, Mrs. Pastern stopped to admire the October light. It was the day to canvass for infectious hepatitis. Mrs. Pastern had been given sixteen names, a bundle of literature, and a printed book of receipts. It was her work to go among her neighbors and collect their checks. Her house stood on a rise of ground, and before she got into her car she looked at the houses below. Charity as she knew it was complex and reciprocal, and almost every roof she saw signified charity. (600)

The storyworld is organized in relation to Mrs. Pastern's charitable enterprise in the neighborhood, which is directly linked with property ownership and financial exchange. The space of the scene is scaled to a level accommodating a collection of houses as well as streets traversable by car, and Mrs. Pastern signals her arrival to each residence by telephoning them in advance, "experienc[ing] none of the suspense of some poor stranger selling encyclopedias," a detail that contrasts a networked social in-group with an unnetworked out-group as determined by financial solvency and property ownership (600). The boundaries of this suburban environment, just as Beuka indicates with regard to other Cheever stories, are later marked by mentions of commuter trains that create the interior and exterior dimensions of the neighborhood.

Mrs. Pastern's fundraising for "infectious hepatitis" also gestures toward the way containment, especially when fallout shelters are involved, is deeply invested in the body's relationship to the environment and the possibility that its integrity might be compromised by invisible forces (including the secrecy of adultery). Cheever's initial

evocation of the space, (non-)place, and sociality of the Pasterns' suburban community, as focalized through Mrs. Pastern, is further linked to the body. Her raised perspective on the houses below hers converts them to social symbols that form a psychologically immunized social body, the parts of which are subsequently presented as a list corresponding to Mrs. Pastern's view of each rooftop:

Mrs. Balcolm worked for the brain. Mrs. Ten Eyke did mental health. Mrs. Trenchard worked for the blind. Mrs. Horowitz was in charge of diseases of the nose and throat. Mrs. Trempler was tuberculosis, Mrs. Surcliffe was Mothers' March of Dimes, Mrs. Craven was cancer, and Mrs. Gilkson did the kidney. Mrs. Hewlitt led the birth-control league, Mrs. Reyerson was arthritis, and way in the distance could be seen the slate roof of Ethel Littleton's house, a roof that signified gout. (600)

Cheever stretches the social body across the contained suburban environment, blending identity, property, and space, juxtaposing this extreme focus on the body's vulnerability—psychologically immunized against danger through a network of “complex and reciprocal” charitable exchanges—with the fallout shelter, a space that (symbolically, at least) protects the body from the trump card of all ailments, nuclear annihilation and its aftermath.

But subtending the social body's charitable financial flows is collective awareness of the private space of the fallout shelter and its modification of the landscape. Its construction exposes how information travels nonverbally through the community and, at the same time, demonstrates the impossibility of concealing a figure that signified “the death of at least half the world's population” through the operations of suburban privacy: “[The Pasterns] would have liked to keep [the shelter] a secret; would have liked at least to soft-pedal its existence; but the trucks and bulldozers going in and out of their driveway had informed everyone” (607). The fallout shelter, which is cordoned off from the charitable relations forming the social body of the community, signals vulnerability to a global spatial paradigm at odds with the psychological space and place of the suburb. In light of Mrs. Pastern's evocation of the social body, the narrator's earlier description of the shelter's inclusion in the landscape as an “embarrassing fact of physicalness” seems to perfectly capture its disruption of this body (and, by extension, the space) of the community. Costing them \$30,000, the Pasterns' fallout shelter is also an exclusive status symbol of financial health which, as is revealed at the conclusion of the story when the Pasterns go bankrupt and must live in a hotel outside the suburb, is shown to be essential for membership in the neighborhood. The fallout shelter has the additional function, therefore, of raising the financial stakes of the social body's immunity: members of the suburb must own or have access to such a space as well as participate in the church's charitable activities.

The Pasterns' fallout shelter is shown to be psychologically essential to the containment of the nuclear sublime. When Mrs. Pastern enlists her husband to collect

checks from the houses she misses on her first tour through the neighborhood, Mr. Pastern meets Mrs. Flannagan, whom he assumes is a naïve, lonely housewife. Toward the end of the story, it comes to light that Mrs. Flannagan, like others in the community, is preoccupied with gaining access to the fallout shelter, and exploits Mr. Pastern's desire for sexual intimacy in order to acquire a key to it:

"I want," she said, "a key to your bomb shelter."

The demand struck at [Mr. Pastern] like a sledge-hammer blow, and suddenly he felt in all his parts the enormous weight of chagrin ... But how could he reform his bone and muscle to suit this new world; instruct his meandering and greedy flesh in politics, geography, holocausts, and cataclysms? ... he took the key off its ring—a piece of metal one and one-half inches long, warmed by the warmth of his hands, a genuine talisman against the end of the world—and dropped it into the neck of her dress. (607)

This moment between Mr. Pastern and Mrs. Flannagan exemplifies multiple aspects of containment while connecting the three registers of exchange, access, and ownership. The exchange of the key gets wrapped up in the sexual dynamics between men and women: the "enormous weight of chagrin" felt by Mr. Pastern is a consequence of his adherence to a mentality in which Mrs. Flannagan, as a woman, is no more complex than "a child dressed in a tablecloth, sitting on a broken stool, waving her scepter over a kingdom of weeds and cinders and a few skinny chickens" (605). Instead, he discovers that Mrs. Flannagan is more than capable of exploiting his personal weaknesses in order to extract property from him. In acceding to Mrs. Flannagan's request, Mr. Pastern sacrifices access to that which contained his nuclear (and sexual) panic, and then must reformat his "meandering and greedy flesh" to the spatial scales of "politics, geography, holocausts, and cataclysms," which are juxtaposed with the smallness of the "one and one-half inches long" key. This sublime exchange—sublime because it puts Mr. Flannagan in contact with large-scale "geography" and the attendant complexity of world systems associated with nuclear proliferation—shatters his sense of spatial and cultural containment, which was previously apolitical, ahistorical, and non-geographic. The exchange implies that his previously "contained" world was somehow free of the forces to which he is newly exposed, that the fallout shelter performed a vital role in his psychosomatic health and sense of masculinity, which he trades for intimacy with Mrs. Flannagan, who, it turns out, has mastered him.

Overlaps between the nuclear and ecological sublims come to the fore when Cheever finally grants narrative access to the fallout shelter. While Mr. Pastern consorts with Mrs. Flannagan, news of the Pasterns' fallout shelter reaches the bishop of the Pasterns' local ministry. When the bishop comes to visit Mrs. Pastern, ostensibly to thank her for her charity work, he immediately requests to visit her garden, in which the shelter is poorly shrouded by the "pretty and domestic" staging of flower beds and statuettes (607). Mrs.

Pastern attempts to distract him with expressions of ownership over the plant life encircling the space:

“Then we have the flowering cherries and plums ... we have the azalea, the laurel, and the hybrid rhododendron. I have bronze tulips under the wisteria” ...

“I see that you have a shelter,” the bishop said.

“Yes” ... “Yes, we have but it’s really nothing to see.” (609)

The bishop demands to see the shelter, imagining its use for “salvation of the faithful,” but the moment destroys Mrs. Pastern’s faith in the sincerity of the church (609). She notes, in reference to a metaphorical structure that might as well be that which contains the community, that “the burden of modern life, even if it smelled of plastics—as it seemed to—bore down cruelly on the supports of God, the Family, and the Nation. The burden was top-heavy, and she seemed to hear the foundations give” (610). While the burden weighing down on these psychological supports is undoubtedly that associated with the nuclear sublime, aligning this burden with the smell of petrochemical products seems to suggest these anxieties are also associated with ecological containment, a containment further reinforced by the setting of Mrs. Pastern’s tidy, controlled, and seasonally organized garden. As David Seed observes, the symbolic location of fallout shelters in nuclear fiction contributed to the ways in which “household, neighborhood, and local community became synecdoches for the nation as a whole” (50). By locating such a figure within a garden, Cheever aligns national space with a site of environmental selection, control, and the expurgation of undesirable “weeds.” The desirability of and ownership over certain plant life, combined with the obtrusion of the fallout shelter, suggests the garden functions as a metonymy for the social selection and control over who gets access to survival, which as Monteyne discovered was usually oriented toward white individuals. It is especially ironic that, given the garden’s biblical significance, the visiting bishop ignores Mrs. Pastern’s horticultural efforts in favor of potentially securing access to the shelter for those deemed “faithful.”

1.3 Owning Survival

In Cheever’s story, containment is rendered and produced through the rhetorical positioning of a narrator who enforces a white locality centered on a fallout shelter, the spatialization of social dynamics, and narrative action filtered through the registers of ownership, access, and exchange. Rod Serling and Lamont Johnson’s television episode of *The Twilight Zone* entitled “The Shelter” is also a containment narrative about a fallout shelter located within a suburban community; however, in the storytelling medium of

television, locality and containment are produced visually. Because of the importance of visibility, this section pays special attention to a feature of containment culture that Nadel calls the “nuclear gaze.” According to Nadel, this gaze is a postwar visual dynamic that “define[s] the difference between dangerous and nondangerous activity, universal and specific jurisdiction, containment and proliferation,” with its most important task being “to prohibit actions with ambiguous motives” (24). With the words “containment” and “jurisdiction,” Nadel’s definition links activities associated with social control to the production of contained space. Nadel finds such a nuclear gaze in films like Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* (1954), in which a (white, male) character confined to his apartment must assemble a coherent narrative based on his fragmentary, voyeuristic observations of the equally confined people and spaces in his vicinity. In “The Shelter,” the nuclear gaze manifests in interactions between characters occurring across property boundaries, in dialogue referencing activity within the community, and, perhaps most importantly, in the way the episode prompts viewers to engage with a racialized social environment.

“The Shelter” tells the story of a group of neighboring families in a suburban community who, during a birthday celebration, receive via radio news of an impending nuclear strike.⁶ The celebrated man, a well-respected white doctor named William, is the only one in the group with a fallout shelter, and immediately takes refuge within it along with his wife Grace and son Paul, excluding the other partygoers, forsaking them to the nuclear apocalypse. These other families, distressed by their vulnerability, hatch a plan to break into the shelter and punish William for his apparent selfishness; however, due to the shelter’s small size, a discussion ensues about which family would ultimately get to occupy it. During these heated deliberations, Marty, the sole nonwhite character, becomes the target of emergent racism from the other families. These attitudes come to the surface as a result of the existential pressure exerted by the nuclear (and, as I will discuss, ecological) sublime on the characters and the desire for containment within the shelter. In addition to revealing these dormant attitudes, sudden contact with the sublime reveals the limits and boundaries of the spatial/cultural locality that inform the social dynamics of the community. The episode ends with a radio announcement that the strike is nothing but a false alarm, causing the characters to reflect on (and try to minimize) their behavior during the crisis and what it means for the future of their (imagined) community.

Like Cheever’s story, “The Shelter” features a frame narrator who introduces the suburban environment, containing and localizing the action occurring therein. The

⁶ News of the strike is initially discovered by William and Grace’s son Paul via television, but the picture blacks out. Mention of the television, and its brief appearance in the background of several scenes, would have created an affinity between viewing audiences and the domestic milieu depicted in the episode.

narrator is the creator of *The Twilight Zone*, Rod Serling, who stands outside the house where the birthday celebration occurs and, looking directly at the camera, hedges the ensuing action for viewing audiences: “What you’re about to watch is a nightmare. It is not meant to be prophetic; it need not happen. It’s the fervent and urgent prayer of all men of goodwill that it never shall happen. But in this place, in this moment, it does happen.” “This place,” like the suburbia of Cheever’s story, is not given a name, though the protagonist and his wife mention that they are roughly 40 miles outside of New York City. The *mise-en-scène* is restricted to a single suburban street with a row of similar houses and the interior of William’s home, environments from which the camera never departs. But this locality, like that in Cheever’s story, is also produced and reinforced through social dynamics between the characters. For example, when the excluded families argue outside the shelter, they consider the possibility of collecting a battering ram from someone on another street. The families worry, however, that doing so might signal existence of the shelter to “strangers” elsewhere in the neighborhood, thereby causing a stampede for the perceived safety it provides. In one striking exchange, the families reveal their collective’s shockingly limited spatial and social boundaries (Figures 3 and 4):

“If we let all those people know that we have a shelter on our street, we’d have a whole mob to contend with, a whole bunch of strangers!”

“What right have they got to come over here? This isn’t *their* street, this isn’t *their* shelter!”

... “And on the next street, that’s another country.” (emphasis added)



Figure 3 Rod Serling and Lamont Johnson, “The Shelter.” Suburban ownership.



Figure 4 Rod Serling and Lamont Johnson, "The Shelter." A different country.

The boundaries of the characters' worlds are shown to operate at multiple imagined scales, allowing meanings generated at one scale to transfer quickly to others when they intersect through metaphor. The scale of the "country," for example, is transposed onto the scale of streets in a suburb, mixing both local and national paranoia into the scene. Ownership of and access to the shelter, the subjects of this exchange, get stretched across these scales, creating a form of containment culture flexible enough for any given space. The shelter operates multi-directionally as a space transposed onto the family, street, suburb, and nation.

Other exchanges reveal how this scalar flexibility of containment both amplifies and hones racist, xenophobic, and nationalistic discourse. Frank, one of the partygoers, proclaims that Marty's desire to be inside the shelter (and, by extension, the United States) is consistent with "the way it is when the foreigners come over here," proceeding to accuse him of being one of many "pushy, grabby, semi-Americans" (Figures 5 and 6):

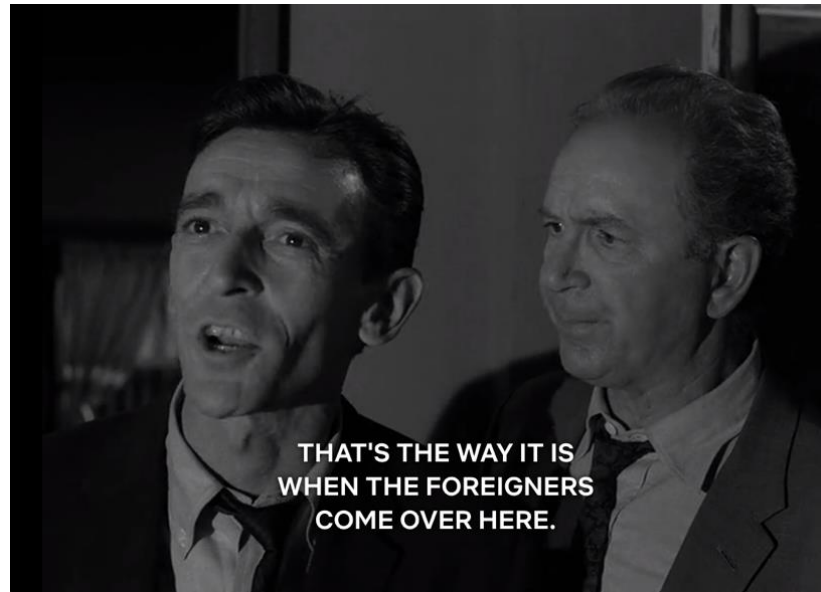


Figure 5 Rod Serling and Lamont Johnson, “The Shelter.” Foreigners.

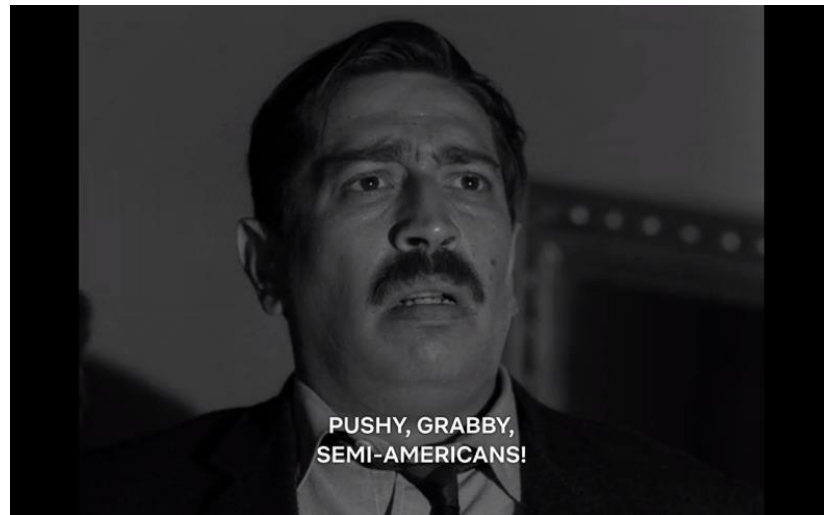


Figure 6 Rod Serling and Lamont Johnson, “The Shelter.” Pushy, grabby, semi-Americans.

As demonstrated above, however, what constitutes a sense of “here” in the episode is actually quite limited and subject to metaphoric distortion. The distinction between the foreignness of “strangers” in the vicinity of William’s house and “foreigners” coming from a different country is blurred when Jerry states, “and on the next street, that’s another country.” In Frank’s mind, therefore, full American identity corresponds exclusively to suburban whiteness, a characteristic that, within the spatial logic of containment culture, can leap from the collectivity of a neighborhood to the collectivity of a nation, and then back again. Later in the episode, when Marty tries to calm the rest of the characters and prevent them from collecting the battering ram, Frank yells at Marty, “Nobody ... nobody cares what you think, you or your kind!”, further emphasizing that Frank is, indeed, a racist. The nuclear gaze of viewers, as it defines jurisdictions and solidifies a sense of containment through the filmed environment and survivalist social

world of the characters, gets trained to distinguish race in the construction of both real and imagined national and local spaces.

There is also an environmental dimension to the locality of this nuclear crisis (separate from the obvious fact that a nuclear strike would be devastating for the environment), revealing how resource imaginaries are bound up with the way the characters (and, perhaps, viewers) imagine collective existence in the suburb, which is demonstrated to be racialized. The episode emphasizes the importance of provisions brought into the shelter, particularly fresh water, when Grace collects water into jars from the kitchen tap. When the flow of water suddenly ceases, Grace panics and drops one of the jars, shattering it. William, attempting to calm her, states, “now make believe it’s perfume, and it costs \$100 an ounce. Maybe in an hour or so it’ll be worth even more than that.” The importance of water is further emphasized when Jerry returns from his home to inquire about the availability of space in William’s shelter after collecting water himself, exhibiting a potent nuclear gaze through William’s window that seems to reach into the viewer’s non-televisual environment. The space inhabited by viewers gets fully aligned with the configuration of William’s home as a “besieged sanctum of white privilege,” to borrow a phrase from John David Rhodes (53) (Figure 7).



Figure 7 Rod Serling and Lamont Johnson, “The Shelter.” Besieged sanctum.

Although the cause of the water shortage is never directly stated, it is presumably the result of too many individuals drawing from the same source during the crisis; in any case, the shortage references an invisible, collective “other” of uncertain numbers, fiercely competing for what remains of a communally held resource. Because of the distortions and overlapping of different scales in this episode, this scarcity potentially takes on national or even global dimensions, particularly when considering the history of water resource management in the United States.

While a comprehensive account of this history is beyond the scope of this thesis, water provision in the United States was, in general, marked by a long trajectory from private to public (governmental) management. Water management and provision began in the

United States mainly via private enterprise with little regard for environmental degradation, as “the country was thought to hold an inexhaustible supply of natural resources” (Thompson 36). Following the Great Depression and the promise of President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, economic recovery was fueled in part by large-scale water projects under the banner of the newly formed Public Works Administration, but “little attention was given to the social, and even less to the ecological, impacts associated with these projects” (46). Eventually, in the period from 1943-60, the federal government gained primary oversight over local water management projects. As Stephen Thompson explains, this gradual movement from private to federal management “followed larger political, social, and economic currents moving through society” (32). At the time that “The Shelter” aired in 1961, awareness of the environmental impacts of irresponsible resource use and development began to inform water policy, and in 1962, Senate Document 97 affirmed commitment to water policy that upheld “national and regional economic development; preservation of resources, including rehabilitation of damaged resources; and social well-being” (59). In 1965, Congress passed the Water Quality Act which was intended to “enhance water quality, protect public health and welfare, and give consideration to the use of water for public water supply, fish and wildlife, recreation, agriculture, and industry” (62). William’s expression of reverence for the preciousness of water would have reflected ongoing national conversations about water management that tended toward the value of public ownership, and undoubtedly overlapped with fears about communism and the nascent environmental movement.

The fallout shelter, then, does not only grant protection from a nuclear blast and its aftermath, but also gives private access to survival resources at a time when the endurance and environmental plentitude of the nation was in question. This is most evident when William first seals the shelter door, clutching jars of water while admonishing Jerry for ignoring his warnings about the possibility of a nuclear holocaust: “To build a shelter was to admit to the kind of age we live in, and none of you had the guts to face that. So now you’ve got to face something far worse, Jerry ... It’s got to be God! It’s got to be God!” To reiterate, the episode demonstrates the “we” in this exchange to be white individuals in nuclear families corresponding to a “full” American identity. Moreover, the scene emphasizes how this precious resource, and its configuration in the episode as the rightful property of white families, gets wrapped up in the nuclear gaze. When William drops the jars of water, which are invested with all the symbolic power of a national resource imaginary, Jerry’s hand lingers on one of them, leaving viewers to question whether or not he will use it as a weapon to strike William and steal the shelter (Figure 8). Nothing less than the nation’s environmental future is at stake.



Figure 8 Rod Serling and Lamont Johnson, “The Shelter.” It’s simply out of my hands.

Thus, the nightmare first referenced in Serling’s introduction to the episode gets fully realized as an “eco-racial disaster” within containment culture, to borrow Sean Matharoo’s term (366). The nightmare, to be clear, is *not* the possibility of a nuclear attack: the characters already express awareness of this possibility during their discussion of William’s construction of the shelter; moreover, Serling does not provide his warning until after this discussion and the subsequent radio announcement followed by the eruption of chaos and panic. Serling’s nightmare instead refers to the emergent racism, xenophobia, and survivalist mentalities previously concealed by a social fabric of ostensible goodwill (containment), all circumscribed around access to essential resources. What is troubling about “The Shelter” is that it presents the “nightmare” as the *expression* of these attitudes in a time of crisis, not that these attitudes exist in the first place. Furthermore, because these attitudes are in part created by and find expression within a locality centered on a fallout shelter, the apparent “nightmare” is also that the boundaries of this locality are revealed and questioned, which is presented as *problematic* for viewers. The danger, expressed plainly by William at the conclusion of the episode, is that things might *not* return to the way they were prior to the announcement. He states, after being promised by Jerry reimbursement for the damage he and the others caused to his property,

Damages? I wonder. I wonder if anyone of us has any idea what those damages really are. Maybe one of them is finding out what we’re really like when we’re normal. The kind of people we are just underneath the skin. I mean all of us. A lot of naked, wild animals ... We were spared a bomb tonight. But I wonder. I wonder if we weren’t destroyed even without it.

Curiously, William suggests normality is produced *within* this acute experience of nuclear panic. Having examined the behavior of the characters throughout the episode, what was evidently “destroyed” was a thin social fabric containing social paranoia, extreme lack of

environmental awareness, and latent but vicious racism and xenophobia. In some respects, what occurs is not a nightmare at all: instead of concealing these attitudes, and allowing them to shape the community in less obvious ways, these overt expressions of them would, presumably, open up a new space for dialogue among the characters, possibly even for viewing audiences. Unfortunately, the episode and its characters (even Marty, who remains mute after being punched in the face by Frank) seem nostalgic only for the status quo.

1.4 Exchanging Real (Estate)

As a novel, Tim O'Brien's 1981 *The Nuclear Age* is a more sustained and complex engagement with the problem of containment at thematic and discursive levels than "The Shelter" and "The Brigadier and the Golf Widow." Rather than depicting people and communities already hemmed in by spatial and cultural forms of containment upheld (but questioned) by a fallout shelter, O'Brien's novel tells the story of another William, surname Cowling, who exhibits symptoms of pre-trauma in his childhood. This condition is caused by a distinct *lack* of psychological containment that he attempts to correct by building various forms of shelter throughout his life, culminating in a fallout shelter during his adulthood. The novel presents Cold War containment culture as an inadequate, bygone construct that only temporarily sutures Cowling's need for psychological defense against the nuclear/ecological sublimates. This is demonstrated by the novel's exploration of how access to containment is configured through unethically procured wealth: Cowling is only able to purchase his quasi-suburban home in the (fictional) Sweetheart Mountains on account of his participation in a massive land exchange involving a raw ingredient for nuclear weapons, uranium. The novel also emphasizes the absurdity of the gender roles offered by containment culture by contrasting Cowling's relationship with the vocal, radical, forthright war protester Sarah with his later marriage to the blonde-haired, blue-eyed Bobbi, a poet who, despite her centrality to the novel's plot, is given neither voice nor dialogue in the novel aside from brief snippets of her poetry that comment on William's psychosis and the state of their marriage as he builds the shelter against her wishes. As William puts it at the beginning of the novel, the women in his life become little more than poetry-dispensing furniture within his vision of domestic containment: "I'm well established and there's no going back. My assets include a blond wife and a blond daughter, and expensive Persian rugs, and a lovely redwood ranch house in the Sweetheart Mountains" (8).

The book begins in the present tense, in which an adult Cowling, prompted by psychotic taunts he believes to be emanating from the earth beneath his feet, begins to dig space for a fallout shelter in his back yard, much to the distress of Bobbi and their daughter, Melinda. Construction of the fallout shelter becomes a kind of back-yard memory mining, during which Cowling recalls his childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood in alternating chapters narrated in past tense, each describing the visions of nuclear and ecological apocalypse that haunt him throughout his life. In a passage from a chapter entitled “Civil Defense” worth quoting at length, Cowling, as a child in the late 1950s, suffers from pre-traumatic visions that mix vastly different scales of time and space while showcasing the overlaps between nuclear and environmental apocalyptic imagery:

The earth’s crust trembled; continental plates shifted in the night. The mountains above town, so solid and ancient, began to groan like the very deepest summer thunder. ... In the distance, a mile away, a trillion miles, I could hear the sizzle of a lighted fuse. I could smell hot bacon. Then suddenly the sky was full of pigeons, millions, every pigeon on earth—screeches and wings and glowing eyes. ... Against the far window a single fly buzzed and hissed. The planet tilted. Kansas was burning. Hot lava flowed down the streets of Chicago. ... Manhattan sank into the sea, New Mexico flared up and vanished. All across the country, washing machines kicked into their spin cycles, radios blared, oceans bubbled, jets scrambled, vending machines emptied themselves, the Everglades went bone dry. ... There were dinosaurs. The graveyards opened. Marble churches burned like kindling. New species evolved and perished in split seconds. Every egg on the planet hatched. (30)

These hyperbolic visions, which go on for several pages, feature a mixture of the mundanity of small-scale, individual human experience, nonhuman agencies, the effects of a nuclear blast, sublime geographic movements, and eyeblink expressions of deep time and space. They prompt William to construct and seek refuge beneath a ping-pong table in his parents’ basement, which he converts to a fallout shelter by reinforcing it with hundreds of pencils, believing them to be radiation-resistant because they contain lead (his father later tells him that the “lead” in pencils is actually graphite, causing William embarrassment). William’s experience of multi-scalar pre-trauma is directly linked with the impulse to construct a shelter, but is also symbolically aligned with the activity of writing, a metatextual move that invites readers to think of the text itself as a form of psychological containment of the pre-traumatic nuclear/ecological apocalypse it repeatedly evokes.

In the case of *The Nuclear Age*, localizing pressure from the nuclear sublime results in hyperbolic distortions of suburban spaces that vault William’s anxieties into global contexts. Tim O’Brien, it turns out, did not intend the novel to be a realistic depiction of “the nuclear age.” In an interview featuring discussion of this novel, O’Brien describes it as “a big cartoon of the nuclear age, with everything heightened and exaggerated.

William Cowling's own fears are way beyond the ordinary quiet terror that most of us have lived with over the last fifty years. ... It's got kind of a Popeye feel. You know, the muscles are bigger" (100). The visions suffered by Cowling throughout the novel are unquestionably exaggerated, but they are nevertheless rooted in real anxieties that this apparently male "Popeye" form of distortion is perhaps designed to contain. Describing his strategy for the creation of male characters in his novels, O'Brien uses the discourse of locality and containment to explain their psyches: "All of my characters are shaken out of a state of stasis—a kind of innocence, a kind of belief in the world that's grounded in a thoughtless traditionalism, and by thoughtless I mean that it is accepted or taken for granted—by some kind of outside, global event" (99). Traditionalism is positioned as the "inside" paradigm, while events that disrupt this paradigm are "global" and "outside." While these forces may be exaggerated in the novel, the basic coordinates hold true for understanding the operations of containment culture: inside is Western, white, and safe while the outside is global, nonwhite, and unsafe (given the novel's subject of a removed perspective on the horrors of the Vietnam War from within the borders of the United States).

This perspective, in which one perceives atrocities on the "outside" from the safe haven of a localized "inside," is staged repeatedly throughout the novel, but perhaps to its most intriguing and meaningful effect when William attends college and decides to become an activist, beginning his associations with a radical group of anti-war protesters who ultimately shelter those avoiding the draft. William sets himself outside the safe haven of his school's cafeteria:

By the autumn of my junior year, October 1966, the American troop level in Vietnam exceeded 325,000. Operation Rolling Thunder closed in on Hanoi. The dead were hopelessly dead. The bodies were bagged and boxed. ... I made my decision on a Sunday evening. Politics, I thought. On Monday morning I purchased some poster paper and black ink. The language came easily. In simple block letters I wrote: THE BOMBS ARE REAL. ... Real. The guns were real, and the dead, and the silos and hot lines and Phantom jets. The war was real. The technology was real. Even that which could not be seen was real, the unseen future, the unseen letting of unseen blood—and the bombs—the fuses and timers and tickings—and the consequences of reality, the consequences were also real. But no one knew. No one imagined. (75)

The blunt message on the sign held up by William emphasizes the gap between representation within language and experienced reality, for although William suffers from nuclear pre-trauma, his secondhand experience of war atrocities is no more advanced than the passersby in the student cafeteria: the only difference is his resistance to containment culture. But the moment alerts readers to their own containment within the safe haven of literary fiction. The capitalized message scrawled on William's sign, "THE BOMBS ARE REAL," has a metatextual function of drawing attention to the overlap between the text as it appears on the page (or screen, as the case may be) of O'Brien's

novel and the text as rendered within the storyworld, the qualitative difference being the involvement of writing machines, the out-of-frame “technology” referenced in William’s narration that insists on realities outside of lived experience. Although O’Brien characterizes the novel as exhibiting a kind of cartoonish masculinity rooted in containment culture, reflexive moments like these are brutal ruptures in that hyperbole that vertiginously expose the reality on which the cartoon is based, working against contained reading practices to momentarily experience as reality what on the surface seems to be evoked as hyperbole. The conditions of “quiet terror” referenced by O’Brien become temporarily audible.

Interestingly, William’s hyperbolic nuclear visions suggest that a shelter that could counteract them would require dimensions and qualities beyond that associated with the instantaneous experience of the nuclear sublime. The shelter must manageably frame human experience within a spatial *and* temporal locality. In this sense, William’s nuclear visions are in themselves a kind of temporal shelter because they convert and repackage what we might understand as forms of “slow violence” (sea level rise, desertification) into the temporality of a nuclear apocalypse, which can, at least symbolically, be forestalled by the fallout shelter. Coincidentally, in his description of slow violence, Rob Nixon uses explosive imagery as a fulcrum against which this form of violence can be measured: slow violence is

delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility. (2)

The desire for the locality offered by containment culture only functions with regard to environmental problems like climate change so long as its effects are laminated to the temporality of the nuclear blast. This is, of course, highly problematic, particularly if, as I have shown, such forms of containment are historically linked with racism and xenophobia: not only would such a temporality obfuscate slow violence but it also charges this obfuscation with social paranoia.

William’s visions also emphasize that slow violence is particularly insidious because it is difficult to perceive, unlike the violence associated with a nuclear blast. Especially within containment culture, slow violence makes it difficult to relate individual actions to larger chains of events with long-term consequences. At the same time that *The Nuclear Age* packages the apocalypse into the repeated bite-sized passages of William’s nuclear visions, over the course of the novel his actions are situated in more complex processes that ultimately facilitate the possibility of such events. This is made most evident at the midpoint of the novel, in which William, having dodged the draft for the Vietnam War for years, discovers a deposit of uranium in the Sweetheart Mountains which, should he purchase the land from its owner and sell its uranium, would make him extravagantly

wealthy and grant him access to the containment fantasy he desires. The process goes smoothly, involving numerous multinational corporations and the cooperation of his longtime countercultural accomplices:

On February 4, 1980, we bought the mountain ... When it was done, we rented an electric typewriter and group-composed the letter. I handled the technical stuff, Rafferty the prose, Sarah the legal ins and outs. Then I sat down at the IBM Electric and cranked out seven copies, one for each Sister. We mailed the letters and waited. That was the hard part: two months before the first tentative reply, another month before Gulf brought in its exploratory team, two more months before we got any sort of bidding war going, then forty days more before Texaco doubled BP and we finally signed the papers. A straight cash deal—it had to be that way. No options, no pie-cutting, no deferred payments. The check was for twenty-five million dollars. (267)

The landscape that offers William refuge during his time dodging the draft becomes the raw material for his containment fantasy that is simultaneously imbricated in the production of conditions that necessitate that fantasy. Generating a narrative to attract investment by corporations, William and his companions secure access to a vision of containment, splitting absurdly large multi-million-dollar checks amongst themselves. William attempts to solidify his vision by tracking down the blonde Bobbi in Germany alongside Sarah, ultimately wedding the former despite the protests of the latter, who represents William's prior associations with the terror of the outside world.

The novel is painfully self-conscious of its containment fantasies and repeatedly installs moments of meta-awareness like those mentioned above. The exchange of land in the fictional Sweetheart Mountains references an imagined piece of land within the exaggerated psychological conditions of the novel's storyworld, but in name also mocks the mental real-estate of readers in which the conditions of nuclear proliferation and climate change are repressed and indeed contained within the topography of fictional experience. This multi-million dollar real estate windfall is, of course, an absurd *deus ex machina* in the novel's plot, but by involving readers in the literary structure that it ultimately produces (William's psychotic, present-tense "contained" world from which the conditions that produced that world are remembered in the past tense), O'Brien indicts naïve, passive readers for scoping out literature for their own containment fantasies. William's real estate exchange gets linked with the exchange of the novel's storyworld by the book object: a sublime exchange because the story suggests that it is, in itself, an unsuitable container for the sublimity to which it draws our awareness. William's description of his environment while dodging the draft resonates with a reading experience of the novel characterized by refuge-seeking: "A safe house, a safe neighborhood ... There were no choices to make; the killing was elsewhere" (153).

If William's psychotic digging of his fallout shelter throughout *The Nuclear Age* is simply a metaphor for the conditions under which narrative is produced and consumed in an

ongoing era of nuclear proliferation blending and bleeding into a climate catastrophe, the novel does not offer readers much of a solution to these problems: William's digging ultimately results in the decision to blow up himself and his family with dynamite in a small-scale emulation of the nuclear blast. At the last moment, he resists doing so, only to reaffirm his commitment to the delusions of containment, "adher[ing] to the conventions of decency and good grace ... find[ing] forgetfulness" (312). We might turn to the moment in which, responding to the taunts of the hole he digs, William observes that "we are in retreat, all of us, and there is no going back. I return to the tool shed" (127), an action that recalls Wilson's postmodern critical response to the nuclear sublime in which we must muster all the resources available in language to survive in its proximity.

Although the fallout shelter mania during the Cold War was confined mainly to the early 1960s, the space carried during this time the entire weight of American society's fears of complete destruction by nuclear weapons. While many texts from this era feature the fallout shelter, the narratives I have selected in this chapter are the most evocative of the pronounced nuclear pre-trauma at work in this period, and prominently feature an overlap with environmental and social concerns in their production and rendering of real and imagined space. Although the output of dedicated nuclear literature waned significantly throughout the 1980s across the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall, nuclear consciousness never dissipated; Cordle suggests that postmodern literature began to carry the banner of nuclear awareness, providing a "rich source ... of nuclear traces" (38) for scholars of contemporary literature. As I will demonstrate, however, the fallout shelter has become a key figure deployed in contemporary fictional responses to the climate crisis. Having established the political, spatial, psychosocial, and textual dynamics involved in the rendering, production, and imagination of containment within postwar fallout shelter narratives, this dissertation now examines how the cultural baggage attached to this space factors into the emergent genre of climate change fiction, or "cli-fi." More specifically, I interrogate popular ecocriticism in its attempts to bound the operations of ecology into manageable systems while using these same texts to examine novels thematizing ecological containment through "updated" fallout shelter spaces.

Chapter 2

Ecological Containment and Irony

The previous chapter explored the genesis of the fallout shelter and its role in Cold War containment culture, examining how the forces of ownership, access, and exchange work to produce nuclearized space in Cold War literary fiction and television. It was shown that the nuclear sublime exerts localizing pressure on racialized narrative environments while greatly amplifying the pre-traumatic intensity of that space vis-à-vis the global imaginary. In the context of American suburbia, local ecologies became synecdoche for the workings of the nation. In the time since the Cold War, however, mediating technologies have made the globe more accessible and knowable than ever before, while those very technologies have become channels of surveillance and behavioral control. Turning to contemporary cli-fi, the existential stakes in these new technological contexts are quite different than those imposed by the nuclear sublime: our planet in the Anthropocene epoch faces a total collapse of the ecosystems that support human life, a comparatively slow-moving catastrophe in comparison to nuclear annihilation. As I will show in this chapter and the ones that follow, the nuclear threat has diminished in social and political consciousness, but lingers beneath the surface of ecological anxiety, often expressed in pre-traumatic variants of the fallout shelter.

This chapter discusses T. C. Boyle's *The Terranauts*, a satire of the events surrounding the construction and operation of Biosphere 2, a multimillion-dollar ecology and surveillance experiment beginning in the 1980s that had the goal of creating a contained, self-sustaining environment that, beyond its potential applications in space exploration and colonization, could support human life in the event of the ecological collapse of Biosphere 1 (i.e., Earth).¹ The structure was, in every sense, an "ecological" fallout shelter infused with the spirit of "technosurvivalism" (Carruth 108). The characters in the novel, in which Biosphere 2 is renamed "Ecosphere 2" (E2), even refer to the structure as a bomb

¹ The *Terranauts* follows Boyle's previous engagements with environmental themes, most notably his novels *A Friend of the Earth* (2000) and *Drop City* (2003).

shelter: Ramsay, one of the “Terranauts” confined to E2, explains that its unstated goal was to “preserve a handful of privileged white people in a hundred-and-fifty-million-dollar bomb shelter and leave the rest of the world to face the blitz of global warming and the storms, droughts and mass starvation that come along with it” (189).²

The Terranauts is a deeply ironic and funny novel, making use of Biosphere 2’s history to spin a tale even more absurd than the accounts written by the original founders of Biosphere 2, which Boyle used as source material. These characteristics lead Allison Carruth to categorize the novel as a form of “wily environmentalism”:

These texts make use of comedy’s rhetorical hybridity—its capacity for satire; parody; genre play; conceptual unorthodoxy; and, hence, thought experiment. Leveraging such comic resources, [they] draw attention to a paradox in recent environmental discourses according to which the planet is already doomed and yet will be sustained through a particular program of change—whether habitat restoration or next-generation engineering. (109)

The Terranauts is also a good example of what Nicole Seymour calls “bad environmentalism,” or

Western works that both identify and respond to ... absurdities and ironies, often through absurdity and irony, as well as related affects and sensibilities such as irreverence, ambivalence, camp, frivolity, indecorum, awkwardness, sardonicism, perversity, playfulness, and glee. (4)

As I will explain, *The Terranauts* uses all of these strategies to position readers as contained subjects in the Anthropocene, a profoundly unsettling move that co-opts readers’ desires for a fun, pleasurable literary experience and converts them into a bleak perspective on our environmental future. This is largely due to the fact that *The Terranauts* is *obsessed* with the idea of containment on ecological, textual, and intellectual levels. Boyle attributes much of his inspiration for the novel to a range of texts written by the original Biospherians, as well as to a detailed study of Biosphere 2 by Rebecca Reider, in which she explains how the founders of this “glass eco-castle” in Arizona envisioned its project of containment:

[they] packed their greenhouse world with more than 3,800 carefully listed plant, animal, and insect species, and tracked biological and chemical changes through countless scientific studies, trying to make sense of the interactions of organisms, soil, water, and air ... [it was] designed to condense the interactions of [Earth] ... in a compact space. (4)

² Coincidentally, John Cheever is among this character’s favorite writers (181).

On one level, the original project attempted to contain within a physical structure an artificial ecology that might produce and maintain a stable climate for human survival regardless of external environmental factors. To test the structure, eight “Biospherians” voluntarily confined themselves inside the ecosystem for two years, acting as “midwives to the birth of a new world” while they subsisted off its food products and performed the requisite measurements of its climate (70). On another level, Boyle’s novel recycles the original Biospherians’ written accounts of the project to create an intertextual dialogue between firsthand accounts and their distortions in a fictional context. Boyle retains many of the ironies that undercut the original project’s fantasy of ecological containment, such as its reliance on external fossil-fuel energy (Reider 240) and its financial support from billionaire investors (Reider 125). What Reider’s study argues, and what Boyle exploits for comic effect in *The Terranauts*, is that Biosphere 2’s unsuccessful pursuit of a self-contained ecosystem also exposed the difficulty, if not impossibility, of escaping the forces that would permit the production of such an absurdly expensive (and ultimately insolvent) ecological spectacle in the first place: specifically, the insatiable drives to see, be seen, and become famous.

The Terranauts narrates the failure of containment through the retrospective written accounts of Dawn, Ramsay, and Linda, three prospective Terranauts who compete for coveted positions in a two-year closure of E2. Ramsay and Dawn make the cut alongside six other candidates, but Linda fails and jealously schemes to sabotage her colleagues on the inside as they struggle to maintain the balance of their ecological fallout shelter. The novel derives much of its humor from juxtaposing the absurdity of life within the back-to-basics ecological madhouse of E2 with what Ramsay describes as “the corruption of the outside world” (158). As the Terranauts resist these corrupting temptations offered to them by jealous outsiders at the visitors’ window, tourists and the media ogle their every move through E2’s glass walls, ravenous for any sign that the Terranauts might “break closure” and reveal the project for the ecological charade that it is. Predictably, numerous problems ensue, notably the unexpected overflows of species packed into the dome: overgrown morning glories block out sunlight to crucial biomes (216); colonies of ants and cockroaches war for space in the back of Dawn’s closet (249); and an infestation of broad mites decimates the Terranauts’ crops, reducing food and oxygen supplies simultaneously (260). Boyle weaves these imbalances into an equally complex visual ecology of surveillance, performance, and spectatorship generated by the characters as they vie for the celebrity status offered by the panoptic regime of E2. As the imaginative gaze of readers inevitably gets wrapped up in these visual dynamics, *The Terranauts* starts to operate under the deeply ironic and reflexive logic at work in many reality television programs, which actively position self-conscious artificiality as integral to “real” experience. This quality is key in Boyle’s efforts to indict passive, “televisual” readers and spectating literary critics as participants in E2’s consumerist fantasy. By installing the transparent glass surface of E2 somewhere in the ironic distance between reader and text,

Boyle alerts readers to the problems (and potential dangers) of “contained” reading practices in which we consume narratives that offer built-in environmental critique rather than critically engage with them as part of broader constellations of environmental discourse.

To explore these ideas, this chapter will proceed by explaining how contemporary literary theory, particularly ecocriticism, has dealt with the problem of intellectual containment of environmental problems, and then examine how *The Terranauts* uses the dramatic irony associated with E2’s decidedly uncontained visuality to broaden the conception of ecology to include non-material symbolic flows as well as physical/chemical ones. Then, by placing theoretical discussions of irony by Claire Colebrook and Bronislaw Szerszynski alongside Mark Andrejevic’s analysis of reality television, I will explore how *The Terranauts* nests this first-level irony within a second, more complex irony associated with the practice of literary criticism. Finally, I will explain how Boyle uses irony to open his audience up to a more earnest kind of ecological eyesight that, somewhat paradoxically, emerges from the simulative context of E2 and the self-conscious language used to narrate it.

2.1 “Nothing In, Nothing Out”

The failure of containment narrated by *The Terranauts* echoes what many ecocritics and other theorists have already articulated as both a feature of Anthropocene ecologies and a way of describing the limitations of the human intellect in apprehending the climate crisis. Timothy Morton’s concept of the “hyperobject,” for example, is now critical shorthand for the uncontainable vastness of climate change and its causes (*Hyperobjects* 1). As Morton explains, hyperobjects are concepts, entities, forces, temporalities, and their interrelationships that are so complex that, at the scales of human experience, they can only be glimpsed in their constituent parts in reduced or mediated forms—in other words, contained. Ursula Heise describes how one such mediation, “Blue Planet,” the first image of Earth taken from space, shows the globe “appear[ing] as single entity, united, limited, and delicately beautiful” (22). The image, Heise explains, was an attractive figure for global imaginaries, but its “erasure of political and cultural differences,” among its other simplifications, allowed the image to be co-opted for a variety of political and cultural agendas (24). Containment is also clearly at issue in Donna Haraway’s all-encompassing equation for the ecological utopia of “Terrapolis,” which she defines using a multivariable/linguistic calculus of deliberately hyperbolic proportions. This “*n*-dimensional niche space for multispecies becoming-with” is “open, worldly, indeterminate, and polytemporal” (11), a space, perhaps, in

which hyperobjects can have presence, though Haraway and Morton would argue that “space” and “presence” are hardly adequate terms for the magnitudes they reference.

Haraway’s and Morton’s terms are paradoxical in the sense that they operate as linguistic containers to name concepts that negate them as meaningful symbols in the first place: they have a frustrating kind of transparency with neither ground nor figure. Timothy Clark defines the psychic stress caused by this disparity built into linguistic access to hyper-scale phenomena as “Anthropocene Disorder,” which is marked by a “vertiginous” tension between comfortably operating within disciplinary boundaries and the apparent drive to study the “‘ecology’ of everything and anything” (145). Heise finds similar friction between “local” and “global” perspectives of imagining the planet, which she resolves by advocating “ecocosmopolitan” culture unanchored to local senses of place while at the same time recognizing their importance for environmental movements (10). Each theorist questions the degree to which fictional narrative helpfully “contains” and helps address large-scale environmental problems, with differing conclusions. Borrowing from Ursula K. LeGuin, Haraway suggests that stories are essential containers for a kind of interspecies worldmaking (40), while Clark finds that fiction often produces incompatible meanings when framed at different scales of environmental thought (23), a view largely shared by Heise, who only cautiously suggests that narrative can “accommodate a view of global systems along with local stories” (208). Morton reasons that in order for environmentally themed art to be effective, it must “question the gap between contents and frame,” somehow offering an experience of aesthetic containment at the same time that it questions the container (*Ecology without Nature* 144), a challenge well met by *The Terranauts*.

From a philosophical perspective, Peter Sloterdijk suggests that the act of containment, whether physical or mental, is a recursive feature of the human condition that helps abate anxiety in the face of a planet we now know to be indifferent to human existence, particularly when it comes to our environmental preferences. He embeds this argument in the well-known greenhouse metaphor for global warming, suggesting that containment has a feedback effect that accelerates the growth of the original problem:

To oppose the cosmic frost infiltrating the human sphere through the open windows of the Enlightenment, modern humanity makes use of a deliberate greenhouse effect: it attempts to balance out its shelllessness in space, following the shattering of the celestial domes, through an artificial civilizatory world. ... [A] comprehensive house-building operation for the species and a policy of global warming must be successful faced with the open, cold and silent sky. (24)

Sloterdijk’s description is marked by a cognitive dissonance similar to the self-negating terms “hyperobject” and “Terrapolis” in that it uses descriptive language to “contain” an external, distant relationship to the problems of “modern humanity.” In this sense, it seems impossible to locate where, exactly, we are in Sloterdijk’s process: either outside

building a structure to resist the “cosmic frost” of existential uncertainty or inside one but somehow still feeling the chill as critical interlocutors. The problem of containment as confronted by Morton, Heise, Clark, and Sloterdijk suggests that language—whether deployed for narrative or theoretical purposes—does not itself exist outside of the logic of containment.

Clare Colebrook calls this feature of theoretical inquiry Socratic irony, in which we can “discuss ideals towards which life can strive, but which can never be fulfilled” (132), which in this case is the power of language to bound the ecological problems of modern humanity. This irony is emblemized in *The Terranauts* by the mantra recited by Ramsay and his colleagues to voice their commitment to E2: “Nothing in, nothing out” (30). The phrase marks the disjuncture between the protagonists’ “intent” of harmonious ecological containment and the “contrary outcome” of furthering a consumerist spectacle (Colebrook 15). The phrase is also representative of the Terranauts’ inability to reconcile this vision of containment with their awareness of E2’s unbridled visual ecology facilitated by the structure’s transparency. For example, as Dawn competes for one of the eight Terranaut positions in the opening chapter of the novel, she explains how “Mission Control was watching and Mission Control definitely did not want to present fat Terranauts to the public” (10). Of her colleague Stevie, who Dawn is certain will make the cut to be a Terranaut, she remarks: “For one thing, she had an advanced degree in the field, and for another, she looked great in a two-piece” (6). And later, when Ramsay assesses his own role as the communications director for E2, he reveals the project to be only a stone’s throw away from the entertainment industry:

E2, the new world, the first and only world apart from the original one ... it was largely up to me ... to present all this to the press, TV cameras whirring, flashbulbs flashing, my fellow Terranauts at my side with their gleaming faces, far-seeing eyes and the rigid posture of Marine Corps recruits, all of us squeezed into designer jumpsuits the color of tomato juice that had been created for us by the Hollywood costumer who’d come up with Marilyn Monroe’s celebrated levitating dress, among other miracles. We stood behind our chairs at a long table set up twenty feet from E2’s entrance chamber and the airlock it framed—a visible symbol of what we were committed to. (42)

Even as Ramsay describes in detail the importance of visual presentation to the public eye, he remains oblivious to how this visual extravaganza problematizes his attachment to material ecological containment independent from external sociocultural dynamics: “This was the moon, this was Mars, this was material closure, not some greenhouse you could just stroll in and out of whenever you had the urge,” he explains (33). Mission Control selects the Terranauts not for their scientific expertise, but for their compatibility with and subservience to a simulation presented as a consumable environmental ideal to the public (complete with a gift shop) (415). In one scene, Linda, the rejected Terranaut,

renders the ogling gaze of E2's tourists in a way that perfectly captures the recursive, self-sustaining quality of this ecological delusion: "They were everywhere, flitting around the outer skin of the spaceframe like outsized moths, their faces pressed to the glass, cameras flashing—paying customers" (70). Linda's narration emphasizes how those caught up in E2's ecological fantasy (whether on the inside or on the outside) overwrite the visual exchanges between tourist and spectacle that maintain its commercial health with a metaphoric mirage of a tidy organic relationship between the surface of flesh and transitory insects.

Managerial and internal surveillance is also an important part of the novel's visual ecology. Boyle highlights this aspect of the novel by renaming Space Biosphere Ventures (the governing organization of Biosphere 2) to Space Ecosphere Enterprises (SEE) (321). This transposition not-so-subtly identifies SEEing as the primary characteristic of E2's power structure. In one chapter, Linda details the visual apparatus that permits her to enact jealous revenge on her more famous colleagues by surveilling them on behalf of the managers at Mission Control, whose goal is to ensure the Terranauts behave properly for the public eye. Even as she describes a nightmarish form of biopower, Linda's tone is casual:

I'm right there in Mission Control, monitoring the cameras and the phone line and the computer too, reporting back to Judy and Dennis on even the pettiest things like who's wearing the same clothes three days in a row or staring into space during team meetings, looking for what Judy calls anomalies. We're building psychological profiles on each of the crewmembers as a component of the sociological and behavioral experiment going forward here, just as Richard, with his blood-pressure cuff, urine samples and monthly strip-down physicals, is documenting the physiological side of things. (132)

Later, Linda surveils Gyro, another Terranaut, as he wanders away from the "Human Habitat" inside E2 toward a more private forested section: "We have the ability to reposition the cameras and that's what I do now, trying to keep him in sight not so much out of duty or even nosiness, but boredom, simple boredom, just that" (148). As is subsequently revealed, Gyro uses what he believes to be the seclusion of the forest biome to not-so-privately satisfy his sexual urges. Later, at the visitors' window, Linda divulges the secret of Gyro's actions to Dawn, who is shocked at Mission Control's intrusiveness: "E2's cameras were in place to record ecological changes over time ... but not to spy on us. It was shameful ... what the mission was doing in trying to control every aspect of our lives" (165). Nevertheless, Dawn and the other Terranauts continue with the project, the success of which they believe to be more important than their privacy, and Linda, even as she exploits the methods of surveillance to which she would be subjected as a Terranaut, still aspires to become one. It is a fairly straightforward parable for how the

mirage of green consumerism easily shrouds authoritarian forms of surveillance and control that prey on the mutually constitutive desires to see and be seen.

The text is replete with moments of surveillance and spectatorship like these. Boyle repeatedly contrasts how these visual dynamics solidify power relations between characters with moments that emphasize the fictive visions of harmonious ecology underpinning the project. For example, Terranauts ogle other Terranauts sharing intimate moments at the visitors' window, but meanwhile the Terranauts' prized galago Luna gets electrocuted by E2's technological underbelly (183); tourists continue to observe them through the glass, often represented only as the disembodied synecdoche of camera flashes (230), even as the Terranauts celebrate the "low rate of extinctions to date" as evidence of a healthy ecosystem (231); and the Terranauts stage a variety of televised plays, but fail to see the species packing of E2 as its own kind of ecological theater (144). It is worth noting at this point that one unintended consequence of Biosphere 2's ecosystem that *The Terranauts* does not parody was the production of toxic levels of nitrous oxide, or laughing gas (Reider 220). As if to compensate for the relegation of that detail in his narrative, Boyle oversaturates the text with the basic irony of the Terranauts' ecological pageantry: so much, in fact, that he seems to leave little room for the articulation of any authentic or more hopeful environmental paradigm that might escape engulfment by the forces of consumer capitalism.

2.2 Savvy Readers and Savvy Critics

I argue that the identification of such entertaining disjunctions between the novel's visual ecology and the ecological failure of E2 is part of the expected form of engagement with the text, making the novel much more interesting from a critical perspective. As Boyle prompts readers to imagine the spaces, origins, and targets where consumptive visual flows occur, they inevitably get caught up in those dynamics, even if they believe they have outsmarted them through advanced critical eyesight. As a way of explaining how Boyle engineers this relationship to *The Terranauts*, I draw on Mark Andrejevic's scholarship on the visual ecologies of reality television programming. Like E2, reality TV uses the contrivance of human containment to create a spectacle. One common category of such programs, according to Andrejevic, features "a return to a natural and implicitly more traditional environment ... the regression of the cast members to a premodern ('precivilized') level of tribal culture" (197). In Andrejevic's case study of *Survivor*, he explains how producers stage contestants in encapsulated, remote regions of the Earth where their competitive activities are reinforced by the supposedly unproduced and natural characteristics of the wilderness environment. Of course, the environment is

actually heavily produced and scripted in order to provide maximum drama for viewers (197). Voyeurism and surveillance, he explains, are also typically built into the architecture of such shows. In his examination of *Temptation Island*, Andrejevic explains how the show's participants surveil each other in order to expose any infidelity in their romantic partners—or, to put it in the terms the Terranauts use to describe their commitment to E2, to discover the truth of whether they are committed to the “mission” of their relationships. While the participants of *Temptation Island* are granted only a “partial” gaze of their companions, the show gives audiences the comfortable seat of omnipresence: a perspective from which one can unmask all deceptions, surveillances, and artifices of production as they happen in real-time (181).

For Andrejevic, occupying this position constitutes a perverse form of voyeurism that converts audiences into “savvy viewers” (135): an inert, politically resigned subject position closely aligned with Morton's explanation of the Hegelian “beautiful soul,” an attitude that believes itself to be separate from the objects of its critique (*Ecology without Nature* 118).³ Andrejevic defines “savvy viewership” as

a complacent “knowing” that takes pleasure in not having any illusions about society ... [I]t sacrifices the possibility of social struggle in order to claim the status of the ‘nonduped’—so as to recognize behind every social ideal the way in which it is deployed as a ruse of power ... Savvy subjects derive pleasure precisely from not being fooled by either the elite or the social critics: they know just how bad things are and just how futile it is to imagine they could be otherwise. (178)

Andrejevic concludes that being a savvy viewer is in fact part of an ideology in which “submission serves as a form of empowerment” (192). In other words, should viewers casually accept the “exemption” from the visual dynamics at work in the object of their entertainment offered to them by its creator, they become subject to the “gaze that monitors and surveys the audience” (190). What is given as a form of empowerment, Andrejevic argues, has as its true aim the control and obedience of its recipients.

In *The Terranauts*, this logic works on several levels. In the world of the story, the Terranauts display a certain awareness of their role as performers in an artificial spectacle, but minimize this aspect of the project in service of the false but more noble pursuit of ecological containment. A “savvy reader” of *The Terranauts* notices and delights in this dissonance, lazily exempting him or herself from the activity of ogling tourists who watch through E2's windows, similarly avoiding questions as to what—if anything—qualifies as “good” environmental behavior. On a more removed level, *The Terranauts* considers a reader's awareness of this dangerous subject position, and also

³ Fittingly, Morton describes the space that the beautiful soul inhabits as a “Looking Glass House” (*Ecology without Nature* 175).

assumes the reader has some degree of knowledge about the actual Biospherians' accounts on which the novel is based. Boyle integrates the presence of these outside texts through the tripartite narrative structure of the novel (first-person retrospective accounts of E2 written by Dawn, Ramsay, and Linda, grouped into their experiences before, during, and after closure of E2), which parallel the retrospective styles of the source texts written by Abigail Alling, Jane Poynter, and John Allen.⁴ This style has the effect of enticing readers to cross-reference each narrative when they overlap on a common event in the novel—much like a literary critic does with an array of texts. One silly but illustrative example is when Linda wears an oversize sombrero while visiting with Dawn at the visitor's window in order to get her attention. In Linda's account, Dawn assures Linda she likes the sombrero and that it looks good on her, but in the subsequent chapter from Dawn's perspective we learn that she actually thinks it is "ridiculous really, like a breadbasket or something" (372). The "savvy critic" not only notes the disparity between external social performance and internal reality, but also delights in the scopic apparatus that permits it—the partition of E2's glass as well as the chapter divisions that divide the narration between the "inside" experiences of E2 (Dawn and Ramsay) and the "outside" ones (Linda).⁵ When this narrative structure is considered alongside the phantom presences of the source texts, we can see how the text broadcasts its status as a fictional construct, not unlike the way reality television calls attention to its artifice with glimpses of cameras or other production equipment during the supposedly "real" moments of action.

The conceit of narrative retrospection also has the effect of creating a space outside the world of E2 that savvy readers can share with the narrators, in a manner not dissimilar from the confessional mode employed in many reality TV programs in which participants offer personal commentary in a visual space separate from the "actual" events of the show. For example, consider the moment in which Ramsay describes the iconic galagos living in E2: "If you don't have experience of galagos, picture a furball with a fluffed up tail, oversized ears and big night-seeing eyes, the sort of thing Disney would put front and center if one day the Magic Kingdom should devise its own ecosphere" (120). Ramsay's direct address to readers in this narrative side-room emphasizes not just the gap between a real "experience of galagos" and their fictional representation, and not just the gap between Ramsay's retrospection and the actual event, but also the eerie chasm between Boyle's E2 and the supposedly more real accounts of Biosphere 2, in which we learn that the project was, in fact, funded by Disney money (Reider 204), and that a galago really did die by electrocution (Alling 169). Ramsay's description is an authorial "inside" joke for

⁴ Boyle acknowledges these sources in the author's notes at the novel's conclusion, along with Reider's study.

⁵ The sombrero, too, operates as a figure of permeability on a national register: Linda collects the souvenir on a brief visit across the southern border to Mexico.

savvy critics who have already explored the ecology of “outside” source texts on which Boyle based the novel. This structure plays out on a broader scale across the novel, where savvy critics are tasked with (or perhaps rewarded by) cross-referencing the irony of the narrators’ ecological fantasies with those of the original Biospherians, particularly as those narratives have been pre-processed in Reider’s study. As such, we straddle the boundary of E2 and the text that contains it like “a cat stuck between the inside and outside” of a house, in Morton’s words from *Dark Ecology* (87), our savvy criticism exposed and the fallacy of fictional containment laid bare.

This comfortable seat of savvy criticism offered by Boyle is named by a concept pioneered long before the advent of contemporary ecocriticism: Jeremy Bentham’s “Panopticon,” a prison designed to permit constant surveillance of its captives. Clearly this is the situation Boyle intended to replicate in the surveillance dynamics between Mission Control and the confined Terranauts, who observe a certain similarity between their ecological utopia and a prison. Dawn, describing her first few days in E2, describes

the visitors’ window, where we could meet with anyone we liked and speak to them via in-house phone, just as if we were in prison—and don’t think we didn’t joke about it, good-naturedly at first, and then, increasingly and inevitably, with a kind of bitterness none of us could have imagined at the outset. (86)

In his theoretical work describing the Panopticon, Foucault also identifies in its operation a self-policing reflexivity, and it is a useful coincidence that he describes its final, most potent architectural form as a transparent structure similar to E2:

[A]nyone may come and exercise in the central tower the functions of surveillance, and ... this being the case, he can gain a clear idea of the way in which the surveillance is practised ... This Panopticon, subtly arranged so that an observer may observe, at a glance, so many different individuals, also enables everyone to come and observe any of the observers. The seeing machine was once a sort of dark room into which individuals spied; it has become a transparent building in which the exercise of power may be supervised by society as a whole. (207)

In the same way that reality television programs broadcast their artificiality in order to lull viewers into scopic complacency, the Panopticon allows its supervisory channels to be seen so that its power seems innocuous but is actually dangerous and all-encompassing. As I have explained, these dynamics are present in the world of the text (visiting tourists looking through the glass, Linda’s casual but obligatory participation in the surveillance of her colleagues) but also in the way Boyle always positions readers as omnipresent spectators of events as they unfold in the novel, and on a more removed level as spectating literary critics clued in to the novel’s source texts. The mediating substance between these levels of “seeing” the text is a pervasive irony, symbolized and manifested by the greenhouse shell of E2. Earnest moments that would seem to carry

enough power to jolt the Terranauts out of their absurd fantasy only fold in on themselves under the anterior pressures of ironic spectatorship. For example, after Ramsay accidentally impregnates Dawn (threatening the delicate balance of their ecosystem with an additional mouth to feed), he holds a wedding ceremony and remarks that “it was a small, private ceremony, attended only by me, Dawn and Gretchen, though a few flashbulbs flared in the distance and half a dozen tourists and at least one journalist pressed their faces to the glass behind us” (184). At first, Ramsay flatters readers by allowing them privileged access to the private ceremony, then reveals that the moment is broadcast to the public, dampening the importance of our participation in the scene and causing readers to question the actual motives driving the characters to wed.

I do not mean to suggest by connecting the Panopticon to E2 that the novel is an accurate account of contemporary surveillance practices. Rather, I argue that when environmental discourse manifests in the rhetorical situation of entertainment culture—as a Disney-funded spectacle or a novel satirizing it, for example—some kind of supervisory force (not unlike the media watching Ramsay’s wedding ceremony) seems to prevent any earnest engagement with that discourse because it can always be dismissed as “only” entertainment with the separate and possibly incompatible aim of monetization. We are caught in the situation that Claire Colebrook, in response to Linda Hutcheon and Richard Rorty, calls the “immanence” of postmodern irony, in which we are forced to occupy two seemingly incompatible scenarios: that either irony short-circuits itself by nullifying any objective sense of reality (suggesting any and all conceptions of reality are valid, including E2’s consumer spectacle), or that irony and the doubt it spawns are necessary if we are to have any point of view at all (161). In her reading of Hutcheon, Colebrook suggests that, even if the use of irony has the intent of critiquing a particular paradigm (such as that of green consumerism), and even if such a critique is well designed, it necessarily relies on the voice of the old, undesirable paradigm to make its point, rather than simply presenting the new paradigm on its own (156). *The Terranauts*, for example, offers the vision of E2 only as a simulative extension of consumer society. The question becomes how and to what degree *The Terranauts*’ engagement with environmental problems and ideas navigates this seemingly unresolvable immanence.

Bronislaw Szerszynski offers a useful framework for how environmental discourse works with and moves through four crucial types of irony toward authentic engagement with environmental ideas: situational (dramatic) irony, the irony of comportment, irony as tactic, and irony as world relation, the final term roughly corresponding to Colebrook’s sense of ironic immanence (Szerszynski 341). One of the main environmental “crisis” moments of *The Terranauts* serves as a useful example to show how these nested forms of irony work. The scene begins as an intoxicated truck driver far away from E2 crashes into a utility pole, causing a wildfire that cuts off E2 from its power supply, in turn shutting down the temperature-regulating mechanisms of E2. The Terranauts, faced with the possibility of roasting in the desert heat magnified by the greenhouse effect of E2,

consider breaking closure in order to survive. As E2 morphs from eco-topia into a greenhouse hell, Ramsay imagines the catastrophic media fallout that would ensue if he and the other Terranauts chose to escape:

Our critics had accused us of hubris and of elitism too, as in let's preserve a handful of privileged white people in a hundred-and-fifty-million-dollar bomb shelter and leave the rest of the world to face the blitz of global warming and the storms, droughts and mass starvation that come along with it, and now they'd fill the airwaves with their derisive laughter and poison every aspect of the mission regardless of what we might have accomplished. (189)

It is one of the more amusing moments in the novel, especially when Ramsay goes on to "scuttle around like a crab in a pot set over a gas burner" (189), but of course the moment is deeply ironic, considering that the Terranauts can leave the structure at any moment. Ramsay clings to the vision of E2's ecological self-sufficiency even as the crisis itself is caused by a cascade effect with distant origins. Ramsay is also willing to sacrifice the lives of his fellow crewmembers—and therefore the ecological management of E2—in service of his dedication to closure and what it represents to the public eye.

Szerszynski's third type of irony, "irony as tactic," is the fictional shell provided by Boyle that helps readers recognize the moment's dramatic irony but also their relationship to the novel that contains it. Szerszynski explains that, in tactical irony, "there is the ironic tension between the ideas and values being presented by the characters within the theatrical frame, and those that suddenly come to the fore when the audience recognizes the existence of that frame, and that the intended meaning is quite different" (347). As Boyle weaves tactical irony into the novel by carefully overlapping many of its details with those of his source texts (in which the Biospherians experience a similar warming crisis), we not only see the hyperbolic quality Ramsay ascribes to the media's opinions about E2 as accurate, but also that Biosphere 2 really was a multimillion-dollar blueprint for an environmental bomb shelter with the same blind devotion to its falsity—and that the fictional experience of *The Terranauts* is ultimately subsidiary to its source material. From this point we enter what Szerszynski calls "irony as world relation," a distinctly *positive* form of irony in which "there is no distanced observer, aloof from the folly and blindness they perceive being played out in front of them. Here, irony embraces even the observer, the identifier of the irony, within its grasp" (348). It is, Szerszynski explains, a "metaphysical" subjectivity in which we cannot strike a negative ironic pose when confronted with environmental problems and their simulative solutions. We come to realize that we are, as Ramsay is to the intoxicated truck driver, inextricably linked with the fate of humans and systems far away from us; with, perhaps, the millions of incoming climate refugees from the global South certain to be displaced by rising temperatures (of the life-threatening kind on display in E2) in coming decades (Lelieveld).

Even this emergence into Colebrook's postmodern "immanence" (or Szerszynski's "irony as world relation") is staged in *The Terranauts* by none other than Ramsay himself. When Dawn decides she wants to raise their daughter Eve inside E2, Ramsay reluctantly agrees to participate and cooperates with Mission Control to use the Terranauts' re-entry ceremony (at which point the previous crew of eight Terranauts emerge from E2 and the next group goes inside) to break the news to the public. The ceremony does not go as planned. Instead of going back inside with six new Terranauts to be with Dawn and their child for an unprecedented second two-year closure, Ramsay flees the compound, delirious in a world uncontained by the protective irony of E2:

I wasn't in the rain forest anymore, wasn't in a controlled atmosphere: I was out in the Sonoran Desert, and I was drunk and sick to my stomach and caught up in the greatest crisis of my adult life ... And I was thirsty, me, the water-meister of E2, where even in our own artificial desert it was insufferably humid and a drink was never more than fifty feet away. Irony? Sure, irony enough for another chapter altogether. Turn the page. Here it is, staring you in the face ... I pushed myself up then and scanned the horizon, looking for the lights of E2 or even the highway beyond, but saw nothing but the darkness of the world. (483)

Boyle again emphasizes the multi-dimensionality of the novel's irony, this time with a direct address to the reader and a reference to the materiality of the text. The page becomes the surface onto which the irony that Ramsay finds in his situation (that as a water expert he is thirsty without the artificial comforts of E2) comes in direct contact with the savvy reader's gaze on Ramsay's written account, and finally the savvy critic's gaze on the page of *The Terranauts*. It is a truly metaphysical moment: in an effort to outsmart the simulative strategies of *The Terranauts* by following its outward movements of comic irony, we find ourselves at last in a greenhouse erected by the aesthetic experience of the novel itself. Suddenly unaccompanied by other gazing tourists, Ramsay's "expert" readers become swathed in his darkness at the same time that they can enter Szerszynski's "irony as world relation," a perspective that upholds the power of narrative fiction to reveal the boundaries of a very real (if not tangible) greenhouse. In this space, *The Terranauts* exists not as a container separate from or external to lived experience, but rather as a kind of tessellation of a fiction that we already inhabited, and that Boyle's novel simply reveals to his readers.

2.3 Breaking the Greenhouse, or, World Relation

The manner in which *The Terranauts* uses the irony of E2's containment fantasy to complicate the tidy relationship between the "inside" and "outside" coordinates of texts and their reading experiences also has bearing on other moments in the novel. I will not rehearse Szerszynski's striations of irony again, but it is helpful to examine a scene in which the novel's visual dynamics intersect with its irony in order to convey an earnest environmental message: that the scientific version of natural ecology as strictly a measure of energy inputs and outputs through a system potentially neglects the equally important non-material and non-human components of terms in that system. The Terranauts, desperate for additional calories, decide to eat Petunia, one of the pigs brought in before E2's closure. Dawn, responsible for tending to E2's livestock, narrates the moment in which she brings Petunia to her fellow Terranauts Troy and Ramsay to be slaughtered, while the other Terranauts carry on with their scientific experiments:

Stevie was in her ocean, fighting algae. Richard was in his lab. Gretchen was recording the growth of select trees in the rain forest, measuring tape and clipboard in hand ... But Petunia wouldn't budge. She was unsettled by seeing the men there because when I'd brought her to the [Intensive Agriculture Biome] all those other times—for a reward—no men were present. Troy ... was in a temper, his eyes boring into me as if all this was my idea ... [The men] didn't want stress hormones released into Petunia's bloodstream any more than I did ... I felt a sorrow so vast it was like a cavern opening up inside me and it was all I could do to keep from breaking down in front of my teammates ... The only relevant equation here was that a dead pig equaled meat and meat equaled calories and protein and essential amino acids. (230)

In its attention to non-material aspects of the act of slaughtering a pig, the scene extends the ecological exchange between humans and pigs to include the emotions evoked by seeing and being seen. Petunia the pig *sees* the signal of human bodies and becomes fearful; Dawn *sees* the signal of impatience in Troy's glare and becomes sorrowful. They are the kinds of processes that would escape the purview of, say, Gretchen's measurement of rainforest growth, the kind of quantitative apples-to-apples version of ecology to which Dawn emotionally reaffirms her commitment. Just as Ramsay's hysteria ironically opens up readers to the reality of the global crises he can only minimize, here the novel shows how the contrivance of E2 enforces an artificially individualized scale in which these non-material aspects of the act of animal consumption can be explored. In a strange move away from its own artifice, the scene helps readers regenerate an ecological framework in which pig-seeing operates in the same symbolic plane as human-seeing, identifying what is lost when the general concern moving this scene along—how to most expediently and effortlessly slaughter Petunia—is carried out to its logical large-scale

conclusion in, say, the aggregative environment of a factory farm. Boyle elsewhere creates ironic distance with absurdity, then writes scenes like this one in which maintaining that distance seems affectively untenable, demanding that readers “see through” the novel and its ironic manipulations, and excavate from the wreckage of cynicism potentially helpful tools with which to see the world.

Later in the book, as the protagonists themselves begin to doubt the legitimacy of the project, Dawn is presented with the choice either to consume a sugary treat offered to her by her colleague Gyro as romantic enticement, or to participate in a more creative form of ecological vision:

The room was lit by the early sun fingering its way across the IAB and spilling through the window, strands of the wool carpet lit like trees in a miniature forest, a whole ecosystem there, moth larvae, dust mites, flakes of shed skin. I was holding a hot iron in my hand. And despite my resolve ... my mouth was watering. I wanted that candy, wanted it more than ever, but I fought myself. “I can’t believe it,” [Gyro] said. “I’m offering you sugar, chocolate, M&M’s—like last time. Remember last time?” He rattled the bag suggestively. “And you’re saying you don’t want them, that you’re what, refusing even to accept a present from me?” I set down the iron, shook my head. “I’m sorry,” I said. (276)

The simple option for Dawn would be to accept the M&Ms: a pre-packaged “Easy Think Substance” (*Dark Ecology* 62) of savvy reading that can only see this passage as a cheap and well-trodden environmental parable about the importance of resisting consumerist impulses in favor of something potentially more sustainable. More difficult, but crucial for any ecocritical praxis, is to see how this moment—as text on a page—is the package of M&Ms itself if read as its own kind of ecological carpet woven from the fibers of numerous outside texts. Behind the simple lesson of saying “no” to consumerism and “yes” to organisms in the carpet is a more profound one about what happens to environmental themes when presented in consumable, reality TV-style packages. For Andrejevic, such packages leave us intellectually primed for real forms of surveillance and social control that predate on Easy Think environmental discourse.

Biosphere 2 itself came under such an attack with lasting effects that shape our political climate to this day. As Biosphere 2 descended into potential bankruptcy in the early 1990s, its Disney-linked financial backer Edward Bass called in the military-style managerial services of the investment banker duo of Steve Bannon and Martin Bowen to take over the complex. As Reider explains in her study, their ascendancy to control of Biosphere 2 was marked by secrecy, authoritarian control, and exclusion of the original founders:

When Martin Bowen’s and Steve Bannon’s faces first appeared on the biospherians’ videoconferencing screen inside Biosphere 2 to tell them the news [of the takeover],

it sounded so strange that the biospherians first thought it was a practical joke or a bizarre training exercise to test their resolve. (209)

Following his tenure at Biosphere 2, which oversaw the sale of the apparatus to Columbia University in 1995 (Reider 226), Bannon went on to work as a producer in the entertainment industry and eventually became a chief strategist on Donald Trump's presidential campaign, and even occupied a position on the National Security Council when Trump formed his administration. Considering that Boyle began work on *The Terranauts* long before Trump was taken seriously as a political candidate, and published the novel prior to the 2016 general election, the events that ensued suggest we should take E2's seemingly hyperbolic surveillance practices, racist exclusionary principles (e.g., the exclusion of Linda from E2 on account of her Korean heritage), and the spectacular erosion of environmental thought behind a mirage of green consumerism very seriously. Indeed, as Amitav Ghosh argues in *The Great Derangement*, wealthy nations like the United States engage in "the politics of the armed lifeboat" when faced with the realities of global environmental problems, whereby the state becomes increasingly militarized and exclusionary to less fortunate nations faced with refugee crises caused by climate change (144). It should come as no surprise that, in describing the aforementioned warming crisis of E2, Ramsay uses the figurative language of naval warfare: "It's like we're a battleship and the enemy lobbed a couple shells over the decks, but now the seas are calm again and all we have to do is keep on swabbing" (198).

If the relationship between Biosphere 2, its fictionalization in *The Terranauts*, and our current political climate did not send chills up your spine, consider further the Hawai'i Space Exploration Analog and Simulation (HI-SEAS), a NASA-funded containment project out of the University of Hawai'i that simulates life on a Mars colony. Among its promotional materials is a video featuring the emergence of one of the crews after a long stay in the dome. After gorging themselves on delicacies unavailable to them during their enclosure, the research crew skydives out of military-style vehicles apparently provided by the US Army, which is also credited in the film's production ("2015 HI-SEAS Mission 3"). In *The Terranauts*, Ramsay victoriously emerges alongside his crewmates from E2, enjoys a smorgasbord of delights only capitalism could provide, and then flees re-entry, imagining that Mission Control might send out "the bloodhounds and helicopters with their heat-seeking cameras and all the rest" (484). His paranoia seems far less absurd when real-world analogues of ecological reintegration feature quick and easy deployment of such military vehicles. While literary critics may not be able to account for the "'ecology' of everything and anything" in their work (Clark 145), climate science included, we are very much equipped to notice when easy technological fixes to our problems get wrapped up in utopian thinking—allowing them to be used in ecologies of power with potentially more nefarious aims. Armed with "irony as world relation," we must interrupt greenhouse-building operations when we see them, or face the consequences.

At first glance, *The Terranauts* seems to use E2 as a staging ground for irreverent, often bathetic drama of its human characters. Excavation of earnest environmental messages from its layers of irony, however, suggests that the novel levies a critique of reading practices that accept such rhetorical frames at face value, or do not regard them as an important part of a text's meaning. Greg Garrard's critique of Ian McEwan's comic novel *Solar*, for example, finds fault with the intertextual, self-referential aspects of the novel similar to those at work in *The Terranauts*: "The problem with these diversions is that they ruin the allegorical drive of the main plot with their authorial self-reference and distracting intertextuality," he states (133). To take this approach with *The Terranauts*, which arguably consists of more referential material than original plot, would miss the way the text's porous frame destabilizes overly simple containments of ecological thought in the eerily real world of E2. In the way it anticipates the desires of savvy readers and critics, *The Terranauts* augurs for an ecocritical praxis marked by permeability and openness. This praxis should not be taken, however, as a false promise of complete intellectual access to the discursive magnitudes of Morton's hyperobjects or the higher dimensions of Haraway's Terrapolis. These terms acknowledge that discursive boundaries exist, just not necessarily in arrangements to which we are accustomed. In this open critical disposition, our task is not to try to recontain the world in the manner of E2 but to use these theoretical frameworks in order to read, respond, and take action in ways that counteract simulative media climates that deploy the promise of containment as a form of political control (e.g., the Trump administration's well-publicized plan to "protect" the United States from human migration from Central and South America with a border wall). In the context of literary studies, this might mean accepting that such works do not exist in a vacuum independent from global political realities, and that critics have a responsibility to respond to them with intellectual rigor, particularly with respect to environmental issues.

To conclude, I regard the aim of *The Terranauts* not just as comic entertainment but also as a corrective guide, or perhaps a reminder, for those caught in a certain malaise with respect to contemporary literary responses to global environmental problems. This seems to be Boyle's general attitude about his own work: as he has stated in interviews, sardonic comedy like reflexive irony helps him catch complacent readers off-guard: "[T]he tragic and poignant can be made even more powerful, more affecting, if the writer takes the reader by surprise, that is, puts him or her into a comic universe and then introduces the grimmest sort of reality" ("Frequently Asked Questions"). *The Terranauts* catches, like flies in comic honey, would-be beautiful souls and savvy readers, prodding them into a reflexive examination of themselves and the "real" simulative world they live in (as real as that world can be). The final moment of the novel is illustrative of this aim in the way it seems to sever its relationship with spectating readers and critics. Linda, in an attempt to sabotage Dawn's relationship with Ramsay and their child Eve who is to be raised inside E2, brings photographs of Ramsay's sexual affair with

Judy (one of the project managers) to the visitors' window, where she intends to display them to Dawn to gain control over her. But Dawn never emerges to meet Linda: "I don't know how long I sit there, just dreaming—a long time, a very long time. I hear the echo of voices, watch the play of lights. The night deepens, deepens again, and Dawn never comes" (508). The repetitive, poetic language of Linda's realization that "Dawn" will not come (the character's name doubling to refer to the beginning of day, along with some sexual innuendo) somehow resonates with the reflexive, comic qualities of the novel. With Dawn's withdrawal back *into* the simulative world of E2, the absence of any conclusion to her retrospective written account, and the lack of a recipient for the transgressive voyeurism of Linda's photographs, the novel leaves only its readers to mire in their role as spectators. In the novel's visual ecology the reader provides the external visual input that makes the whole apparatus run, but when this energy has nowhere to go but a dead end, it turns onto itself.

Chapter 3

Fallout Shelter Cinema

The previous chapter developed the idea of visual ecology, showing how performance and spectatorship flow through biological/technological systems to destabilize capitalistic efforts to physically contain the environment inside “ecological” fallout shelters. I now turn to three examples of what I call “fallout shelter cinema” that center the fallout shelter space in their engagements with climate change: David Fincher’s *Panic Room* (2002), Jeff Nichols’ *Take Shelter* (2011), and Bong Joon Ho’s Oscar-winning *Parasite* (2019). Visual ecology is both a defining feature of the cinematic medium and central to each of these films’ thematic deployment of the fallout shelter. Through this space, each film also represents a continuation of the “post-nuclear” era of filmmaking, a term Adrian Ivakhiv uses

in a double sense, where the nucleus that had been decentered (if not exploded) was that of the bomb—the technological threat that held together the bipolar geopolitics of the Cold War world—but also that of the patriarchal family and the traditionally ordered set of social relations for which it served as the formative, cellular kernel. The West’s nuclear adversary having disappeared, and the terrorist threat not yet having arisen, these films took place mostly in a safely middle-class North American world, one in which global reference points are obscured or nonexistent and in which family and interpersonal relations are central. (270)

Ivakhiv saw the locality at work in post-nuclear cinematic space as evidence that the nuclear threat had passed—in fact, it was simply repressed and contained by cultural proliferation of the fallout shelter. As a space that historically represented the defensive impulses of the American nation, the fallout shelter was “recalled to life” when the terrorist threat *did* arise. The films in this chapter are both post-nuclear *and* post-9/11: a combination in which the nuclear sublime still exerts localizing pressure while the horrific spectacle of global terror and its socio-cultural fallout make such localities especially fragile. As a result, these films exhibit a pronounced concern with the technologies, behaviors, and optics of security while grappling with the stress forces

between competing spatial frames. Each example centers these concerns on fallout shelters or spaces that resemble them, which also get directly or indirectly linked with the looming threat of climate change.

I begin with a discussion of *Panic Room*, exploring how the film blends the post-9/11 discourse of “national security” into Robert Marzec’s notion of “natural security” in the definition of a new (environmental) American “homeland” confronted with the reality of climate change and global resource demands. Turning to *Take Shelter*, I discuss how the “gestural homeland” of cinema creates an aesthetic vocabulary for apprehending non-scientific indicators of climate change. Finally, I consider how *Parasite* uses the fallout shelter to reveal cultural forms of containment while local space buckles under the pressures of cultural imperialism. Natural security surfaces again to reveal how these issues are linked with climate change, while the film implicates passive forms of scholarship in intra-class warfare.

3.1 *Panic Room* and the Home(land)

David Fincher’s *Panic Room* (Columbia Pictures) tells the story of Meg Altman (Jodie Foster) and her daughter Sarah (Kristen Stewart) as they struggle to adapt to life in their new home, a mansion in New York, amidst the fallout of Meg’s recent divorce from a wealthy pharmaceutical executive. When three intruders arrive during the night (Forest Whitaker, Jared Leto, and Dwight Yoakam), Meg and Sarah take refuge in the mansion’s panic room (which I read as an urban fallout shelter), only to discover that they have become the unwitting guardians of a vast fortune hidden inside the room by the home’s previous owner. Making use of the room’s closed-circuit surveillance system and a variety of survival resources, the mother-daughter duo resists the intruders’ assault, transforming the spacious mansion into a suffocating tactical battleground with millions on the line.

Written and produced before but released to audiences only several months after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, *Panic Room* does not fit tidily into the category of post-9/11 narratives; however, as Jonathan Markowitz, Rebecca Bell-Metereau, and John Kitterman have argued, the film’s thematization of security, surveillance, and home invasion both presaged and amplified nationwide concern with personal security emerging from the U.S. government’s “War on Terror” and the creation of the Department of Homeland Security—indeed, Fincher was one of several Hollywood directors whose imaginative talents were called in by U.S. intelligence agencies in an effort to prevent future terrorist attacks (Frank 489). *Panic Room*, if taken as a domestic allegory for national security concerns in the wake of 9/11, may at first seem to fall in

with other post-9/11 narratives that, according to Richard Gray, simply “retreat into domestic detail” while obfuscating a wider ethno-geographic field of trauma surrounding 9/11 (134). But reading *Panic Room* only in the context of 9/11 misses the film’s artistry in capturing the anxieties associated more closely with Robert Marzec’s notion of “natural security,” or the extension of national security concerns into the frame of global environmental risks, namely climate change and its impacts. Marzec explains that

[i]n the age of climate change, the environment is both a source of concern (found in various struggles to implement new forms of environmental care and sustainability) and, understandably, an object of growing fear (in terms of diminishing resources, rising sea levels, growing food and water scarcity, etc.). These concerns, bound up with post-9/11 fears of terrorism, are in the process of being recast according to the parameters of risk and security—generating an environmental politics that extends the restrictive measures of homeland security into the domain of ecological security. (3)

I argue that the “panic” of *Panic Room* emanates not only from its basic plot points of invasion, surveillance, and assault and their symbiosis with the post-9/11 sociocultural upheaval in the U.S., but also from questions and anxieties associated with mediated environmental perception, resource scarcity, and confronting the nonhuman magnitudes of the Anthropocene. From this point of view, *Panic Room*’s domestic allegory is less a discursive limitation than it is an asset for situating human-scale daily life in a broader ecological context. The film, beyond its apparent interest in bringing national security concerns into the space of the home, is also a story about Western dwelling habits and their absorption into the domain of *ecological* security in an urban environment. Although as wealthy New Yorkers the protagonists are hardly representative of those most impacted by climate change, reading *Panic Room* through this ecocritical lens brings to the fore this massive disjuncture between the ultra-wealthy and climatologically subaltern populations.

First, drawing on Stacy Alaimo’s work on the concept of (environmental) homeland security in her book *Exposed*, I explore how the film uses the play between interiority and exteriority alongside a gambit of visual metaphors to give the panic room and the surrounding field of the Altman home the referential scaffolding needed to access the larger environmental scales associated with natural security. Then I reinterpret the film’s plot in terms of Marzec’s notion of natural (rather than national) security. Finally, I consider the conceptual import of the “closed circuit” not only as a structuring metaphor for the film’s use of the surveillance trope, but also as a kind of narrative side-effect akin to Timothy Clark’s notion of Anthropocene disorder, a condition caused by the “vertiginous” tension associated with thinking of human life at a variety of ecological scales (145).

3.2 Space, Scale, and Language

In her book *Exposed*, Stacy Alaimo applies the term “homeland security” from post-9/11 national discourse to describe how modern Western subjects use the space of the home to “keep wild creatures at bay, to ensure the domain of the human” (9). According to Alaimo, this “seemingly benign dream of protection [given by the home] has morphed into a national delusion, with the borders of the home serving as a microcosm for racial, class, and national borders” (21). For Alaimo, the home is, on the one hand, a rigid “conceptual apparatus” that upholds a variety of psychic structures that propagate the illusion of safety and control in the face of an increasingly globalized (and nonhuman) worldview, and, on the other hand, a porous, permeable space that, when disrupted or challenged by world events or environmental problems, exposes the fragile category of the human and the superficiality of how we imagine space, place, and our relationship to others and the environment. Alaimo points to 9/11 as one such event that laid bare the absurdity of the dream of homeland security as imagined on the domestic scale: after the attacks, the DHS urged citizens to buy duct tape to seal their homes in order to protect against a biochemical attack, even though people are much less likely, she explains, to be harmed by terrorism than by environmental toxins that seep into the domain of everyday life from air, water, and consumer products (21). Alaimo does not, however, leave much room in her analysis to consider how, precisely, the scale of the family home comes to be mapped onto the idea of the nation as a “homeland”—in her language, it simply “morphs” (21). Similarly, Amy Kaplan’s otherwise detailed investigations into the post-9/11 genesis of the term “homeland” glosses this leap: “Referring to the nation as a home, as a domestic space through familial metaphors, is commonplace, probably as old as the nation form itself” (85). Somewhere between domestic spaces and their figurative imbrication with the space and place of a nation, a massive translation of scale occurs. Understanding how *Panic Room* achieves this feat—which captured U.S. audiences to the tune of nearly \$100 million (“Panic Room”)—will potentially help resolve not only these muted metaphoric stress forces between home and nation (and, by extension, home security and national security), but also open up avenues of discussion for “natural security” as formulated by Marzec.

The mansion and its panic room, which I read as an urban form of the fallout shelter, are first introduced to the audience during Meg and Sarah’s initial tour of the home alongside a pair of real-estate agents. As they walk into the master bedroom, Meg notices a mismatch between her expectation of the house’s interior dimensions and her perambulatory experience of them. “Is this room smaller than it should be?” she asks her reflection in a mirror hung on the wall. The agents reveal the missing space concealed behind it, a panic room made of reinforced steel equipped with a closed-circuit surveillance system, a variety of survival resources, and a guillotine-like sliding steel

door. As the agents demonstrate the room's security features, Meg claustrophobically recoils and exits, and the exterior mirror swings back into place. Fincher leaves Meg facing her startled reflection, elegantly associating the interior space of the panic room with Meg's sense of bodily and psychic interiority, while the emotions of panic and anxiety become linked with a specific kind of architectural space equipped with the powers of surveillance (Figure 9).



Figure 9 David Fincher, *Panic Room*. Meg's reflection.

Additionally, the scene creates a relation between two separate scales: the panic room's segmentation and miniaturization of the mansion into a composite array of video feeds, and the scale of the house as experienced quasi-proprioceptively by the characters. The cinematic eye modulates between these spaces, establishing them as separate visual/spatial constructs. This division is a downscaled and simplified version of a problem neatly captured by Timothy Clark, who describes the unbridgeable gap between individual perception and imagining the planet in its entirety: "In fact, no-one has immediate access to the world as a planet: what we have is a complex set of data from various recording stations at various points on the surface or above, and a history of such data or comparable information, all needing to be synthesized, interpreted and debated" (7). Just as the Anthropocene era confronts us with our bodily limitations and dependence on symbolic systems to create a sense of the planetary world, so the panic room confronts its user(s) with the bare fact that the surrounding field of the mansion cannot be seen or experienced in its entirety unless mediated in such a fashion (Figure 10).



Figure 10 David Fincher, *Panic Room*. Inside the panic room.

But even before this scene, the film primes its audience for this mood of interior paranoia on the larger scale of New York City. In the film's opening sequence, before the Altmans are introduced, production credits are displayed as extruded block letters hovering amidst familiar skyscrapers from the crowded New York skyline. Moving like a surveillance camera and invoking the mood of security, the cinematic camera pans from high vantage points along vertical and horizontal vectors, scanning the swarming streets below and the reflective surfaces of adjacent buildings, "reading" the credits that have been incorporated into the built environment. The credits vault language onto a larger-than-normal scale, giving the letters referential gravity with their apparent mass, but also associates them with the unidirectional optics of the reflective skyscrapers surrounding them; that is, one can look out but not in (a quality shared with the panic room), creating a sense that one might be being watched while reading (Figure 11). At the same time, staging language in this way miniaturizes the city, and makes it readable like text, as part of an apprehensible human-scale symbolic system.¹ The final frame of the opening

¹ The opening sequence resonates with Michel de Certeau's perspective on the urban landscape of New York City from the top of the World Trade Center. He writes, "A city composed of paroxysmal places in monumental reliefs. The spectator can read in it a universe that is constantly exploding. ... On this stage of concrete, steel and glass, cut out between two oceans (the Atlantic and the American) by a frigid body of water, the tallest letters in the world compose a gigantic rhetoric of excess in both expenditure and production" (91). Considering the timing of *Panic Room*'s release, Fincher's possible nod to de Certeau's view from the World Trade Center is uncanny and sinister. Jean Baudrillard also remarks on the optics of the New York City skyline, noting of the World Trade Center that "[The twin towers] culminated in the exact reflection of each other. The glass and steel façades of the Rockefeller Center buildings still mirrored each other in an endless specularly. But the Twin Towers no longer had any façades, any faces. With the rhetoric of verticality disappears also the rhetoric of the mirror. There remains only a kind of black box" (40). I would like to thank Dr. Lucy Bond for alerting me to these theoretical connections.

sequence displays the title of the film hovering in mid-air, which seems to label the entirety of the built environment in addition to the actual room that moments later becomes the focal point of the film. The effect is a kind of mise-en-abyme in which the panic room, which “contains” the entirety of the mansion in its video feeds, is both the largest and smallest spatial unit presented in the film. Nested in this way, the Altmans’ panic room, and by association Meg’s sense of psychic interiority, comes to encompass the wider range of the city, creating a bridge between domestic security concerns and those of a national environment with larger boundaries.



Figure 11 David Fincher, *Panic Room*. Opening credits.

In a later scene, one of the intruders holds up a handwritten sign to one of the security cameras: “what we want... is in that room,” it reads to Meg and Sarah on one of the monitors (Figures 12 and 13). The moment calls upon viewers to internally auralize the words alongside Meg and Sarah, bridging the space of the panic room—“that room”—and viewers’ own sense of interiority. In the symbolic logic of the film, both building-sized computer-generated text appearing *outside* and remediated handwritten text appearing *inside* reference the same secured architectural space that is also associated with psychic interiority. The overall effect scales the restricted cinematic environment of the panic room and the mansion into the wider field of the city at the same time that mental real estate of both protagonists and viewers becomes a fragile and contested site on account of the physical threat posed by the intruders. One of the associate creators remarked that Fincher’s goal was to give audiences the feeling of standing “on a slight edge, not knowing where reality ended and unreality began ... that slight discomfort that you knew something wasn’t quite right, but it looked so real that you couldn’t really put your finger on it” (Fincher).

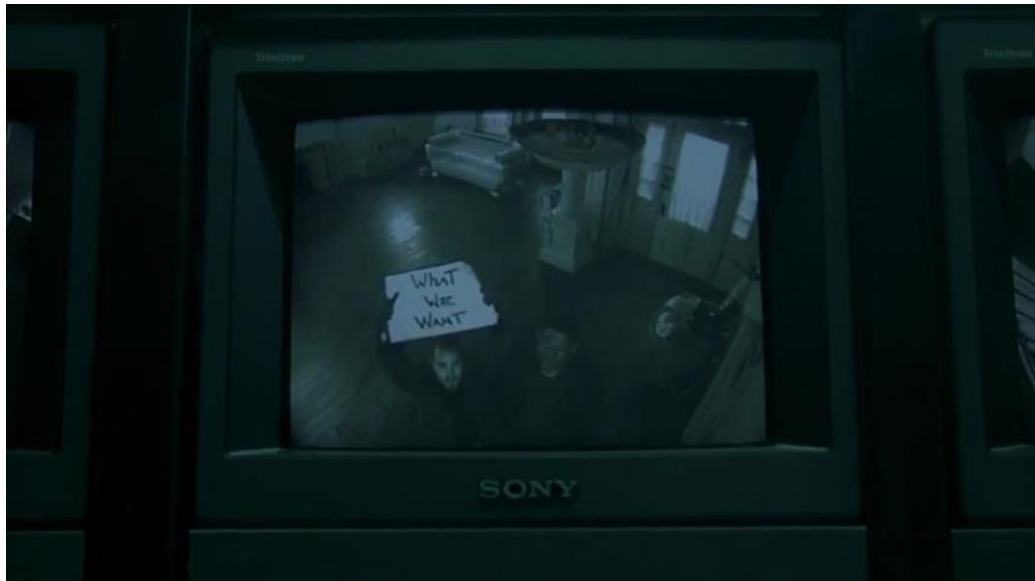


Figure 12 David Fincher, *Panic Room*. What we want...

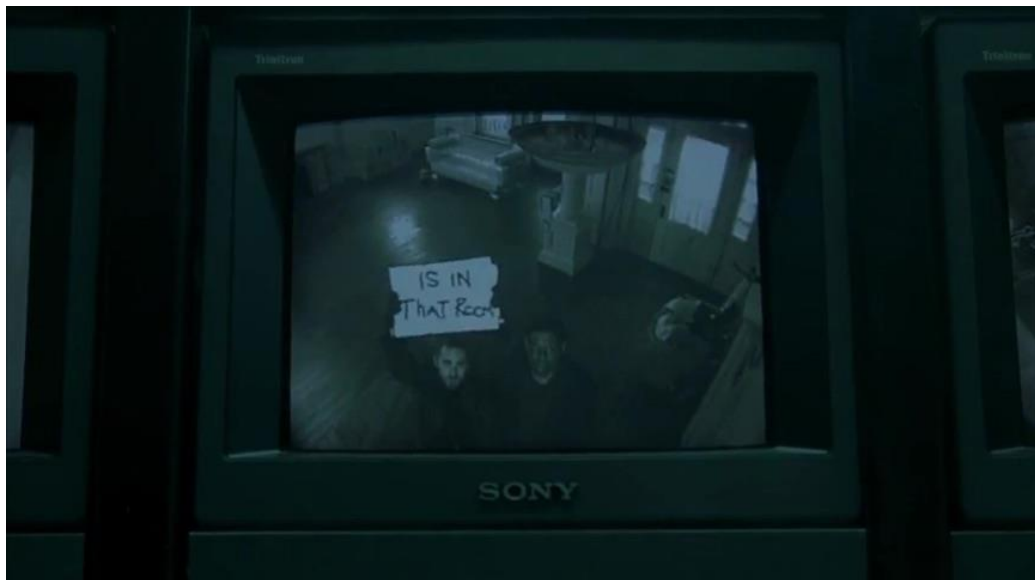


Figure 13 David Fincher, *Panic Room*. ...Is in that room.

The film complements this distortion of the scale of language and the spaces in which it appears with a variety of cinematographic techniques. This is most apparent in the “big shot” for which Fincher most wanted the film to be remembered from a craft perspective: the scene in which the camera, pausing on Meg as she falls asleep, suddenly begins to move through the house on its own accord, mapping the space for the audience while detailing how the three intruders break into the house. The camera seems almost spectral as it moves through walls, passes through the handle of a coffee pot, and investigates a keyhole, creating in its movements a subjectivity that reflects the panic room’s drive toward omnipresence and environmental control. The camera watches Meg as she unpacks boxes or takes a bath, lingering on points of connectivity between the home’s

interior and the external world, emphasizing the Altmans' dependency on external systems during a post-divorce period in which Meg most wants to feel independent. The filmmakers also repeatedly emphasize, for more than reasons of simple product placement, that Meg and Sarah have arrived on the "shores" of their new home via the Mayflower Transit company. This inclusion invokes U.S. national history and, by direct visual juxtaposition with family photographs, places this register of meaning alongside the Altmans' personal family history, perhaps visually creating a kind of "familial metaphor" that Kaplan suggests connects home to nation. The moment could be read as ecological commentary as well: the "Mayflower" was the name of the ship that originally carried English Puritan pilgrims from the old world to the new at Plymouth Rock, beginning the foundations of a society that would in time grow into the United States. It was, in some respects, an attempt to establish a new "homeland" that was fueled by exploiting natural resources and converting them into capital, which we find signified by the "buried treasure" inside the panic room.²

3.3 "It's Disgusting How Much I Love You"

If the metaphorically flexible boundaries of the Altman residence stand in for the boundaries of the nation (or, at the very least, a city that stands in for the nation during the peril after 9/11), then we can begin to interpret the film's drama staged around and across these boundaries—the security apparatuses between city and home, and between home and panic room—as saying something about how we think about national security and, by association, Marzec's "natural security." Broadly understood, the latter term names neocolonial military projects of enclosure and privatization of common land and resources (particularly in developing countries) with the aim of maintaining energy, food, and water security for a given country (104), intersecting with the entrepreneurial drive to accumulate capital (84). Marzec suggests that natural security is "the idea that nature holds the keys to national security" (3), resonating with the colonization of the New World I outline above. This idea is closely aligned with what Amitav Ghosh, citing Christian Parenti, calls the "politics of the armed lifeboat," in which a nation militarizes its borders and engages in extensive anti-immigrant policing in response to environmental threats, "a strategy that conceives of the preservation of the 'body of the nation' in the most literal sense: by a reinforcement of boundaries that are seen to be

² I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for some of these insights.

under threat from the infiltration of the pathological ‘bare life’ that is spilling over from other nations” as a result of climate change (146). While Carol Siegel reads *Panic Room* as an allegory for the conflict between white, ultra-wealthy property owners and the nonwhite urban dispossessed³ (represented by the three intruders), I read *Panic Room* more broadly, interpreting the burglars’ invasion plot as an unwelcome breach of national/natural security. The Altmans’ home security comes to mean protection of the home(land) environment, including natural resources that support life in that environment, surveillance and management of human populations, the fear and expurgation of foreign “others” perceived as threats to social and economic stability, and the maintenance of global capitalist systems that uphold the power of purely symbolic forms of resource security (i.e. the panic room’s bank bonds).

But what aspects of *Panic Room* are allegorically tied up in environmental concerns is not immediately evident. Bruno Latour notes that the word “panic” is derived from the figure of the Greek god Pan, the god of nature, who was “credited with arousing terror in lonely travelers passing through the woodlands” (46). Besides this tenuous connection, nature is mainly out of frame in *Panic Room*. The film does not feature any natural disasters induced by climate change, nor a post-apocalyptic mise-en-scène, nor wilderness with plants and animals. Generally speaking, urban environments pose a challenge to traditional ecocriticism because they do not subscribe to the “wilderness fetishism” associated with supposedly more proper forms of environmental narrative, according to Michael Bennett (33), who suggests that “ecocriticism will continue to be a relatively undertheorized field unless and until it more freely ventures into urban environments” (39). Similarly, Astrid Bracke notes that “ecocritics—with a few exceptions—have yet to productively engage with urbanized environments” (8). If we examine the film carefully, it seems more than attentive to the Altmans’ place in an urban social and resource ecology that undoubtedly participates in and affects environments and ecologies elsewhere.

The film emphasizes how the Altman’s habitancy is predicated on networks of energy, food, and resource (read: natural) security. The camera repeatedly focuses on points of connectivity with the external world: electrical sockets, telephone connections, bathroom plumbing, sinks, key holes, lights, windows, etc. Furthermore, the unpacked status of the Altman belongings allows the camera to emphasize and linger upon specific consumer goods and commodities: wine, cola, coffee, bottled water and orange juice, batteries, insulin, wooden picture frames, phones, elephant-print pillows, appliances. Not yet stabilized and placed into the background of the optimized flows of everyday life, these objects are slightly uncanny because they are featured so prominently yet, having only just come into the mansion via the “Mayflower” moving company, seem to have

³ In her comments on this chapter, Dr. Lucy Bond alerted me to the fact this is also a trope “broadly used in 9/11 trauma fiction.”

neither origin nor settled destination; the audience encounters them as objects still in transit. While not quite reaching the level of what Ben De Bruyn calls a “circulation narrative” (958), or a literary excursus about the distant origins and journeys that commodities undergo on their ways into the realm of the consumer, such items and points of external connection suggest many unknown “elsewheres” because of the restricted cinematic field of the home. As Timothy Clark puts it, “How could anyone, presented with a modern Western breakfast, intuit that the food miles that went into it may circle the globe? The demand now, baldly expressed, would be to realize that while immersed in my own phenomenal field of significances, I am also effectively on the other side of the world” (39). As Meg and Sarah dine on ordered pizza, cola, and wine amid boxes with contents yet to be unpacked in a house much too big for two people, Meg’s subsequent words to Sarah, “it’s disgusting how much I love you,” would seem to reference the quantitative excesses of urban Western privilege rather than an abundance of motherly love.

Up and against these connections is the supposedly hermetically sealed world offered by the panic room, which becomes the space that reveals the utter fragility of the urban ecosystem on which the Altmans depend. The panic room represents a space in which the ultimate fantasy of self-sufficiency, of an existence neatly separated from the dark realities of oppressive forms of global capitalism, can be sustained to its final breaking point. What at first is marketed to the Altmans as a space neatly cordoned off from the rest of reality becomes, as the film unfolds, one of the most dependent and vulnerable. As the burglars strip away its plastered facade, the space is shown to be deeply connected atmospherically, electronically, and architecturally to the surrounding space. The burglars easily snip apart a telephone line that Meg uses to phone for outside help; they pump propane gas into the room through an air vent with entry points only just behind the wall; the utility of \$20 million in bank bonds is nil when secured behind the door of a safe to which no one knows the combination. The failure of the panic room represents an ecological breaking point, emphasized when Sarah has no insulin to regulate her blood sugar. Ironically, it is the Altmans’ drive toward privatized personal security that exposes the ecological instability of their familial collective, and the insulin needles become the weapon that Sarah uses to help defeat the last and most violent intruder, Raoul. But *Panic Room* is not simply about the ecological stability of one family or one home, as the film reminds us in its concluding scene. Presumably the day or some days after, Meg and Sarah sit on a public park bench in Manhattan and read aloud the housing classifieds, one after another, as if the list will never end. The camera slowly moves away from the duo with a “dolly-zoom,” a camera technique that keeps its object of focus roughly the same size while the surrounding visual field gets larger, resituating the mother-daughter pair and their experiences in the broader ecological wilderness of the New York masses.

3.4 Green Powers and the Closed Circuit

Natural security is predicated on a long-established political/military ideology of land enclosure that secures the natural resources of the commons (both domestic and foreign) and converts them to private property. This tension between privately and publicly owned spaces is emphasized in the conclusion of *Panic Room*, which returns the mother-daughter duo, in a loop, to the kind of space in which their story began: a public environment. This movement directly contrasts the confines of the panic room with the openness of a New York park, in which the pair temporarily ponders the reality of owning urban space in the wake of an experience that so starkly revealed how even the most fortified homes are ultimately permeable, ecologically dependent entities (Figure 14). To frame it another way, the film embeds the drama surrounding the panic room's closed-circuit surveillance system in this larger closed circuit on the level of narrative structure, in which the characters complete an oscillation between public and private environments.

This dynamic between these two types of environments as they appear in the film is described in a complementary manner by Paul Edwards, who, writing about Cold War political ideology, distinguishes between “closed worlds” and “green worlds.” A closed world, Edwards explains, is

a radically bounded scene of conflict, an inescapably self-referential space where every thought, word, and action is ultimately directed back toward a central struggle ... Turned inexorably inward, without frontiers or escape, a closed world threatens to annihilate itself, to implode ... Action within this space centers around attempts to invade and/or escape its boundaries ... Notably, the closed world includes not just the sealed, claustrophobic spaces metaphorically marking its closure, but the entire surrounding field in which the drama takes place. (12)

The panic room, in its deployment of a fortified closed-circuit surveillance system and the capitalistic gravity of its \$20 million in bank bonds, is emblematic of the closed world. But the characteristics of the closed world also describe the self-suffocating project of natural security which, according to Marzec, in its blind “appropriation of the planet's stored resources,” simultaneously produces anthropogenic climate change (244), undoubtedly exacerbating the need to secure additional resources in what makes up a climatological feedback loop.

In contrast to the self-defeating exclusivity of closed worlds, Edwards describes “green-world” drama, which “thematizes the restoration of community and cosmic order through the transcendence of rationality, authority, convention, and technology. Its archetypal form is the quest, in which characters struggle to integrate (rather than overcome) the world's complexity and multiplicity. The green world is indeed an ‘open’

space where the limits of law and rationality are surpassed” (13). According to Edwards, green worlds are typically staged outdoors and feature a confrontation with “green world powers” that are dangerous not because they have evil or malevolent intentions (as is the case in closed world narrative, for which we might think of the mansion’s three intruders) but because they “exceed human understanding and control” (311). Such forces include “the private purposes of nonhuman entities and the uncontrollable force of natural cataclysms” (311). The closed circuit surveillance system of the panic room—in which the characters perceive the fragments that make up a composite whole of the house from a single point of observation—has as an obverse the “green” (public) world from which Meg and Sarah perceive (and try to “integrate,” rather than control) the separate components that, altogether, form the privatized city (the seemingly endless list of potential homes from which Meg and Sarah can choose). In the context of the Anthropocene, this list itself constitutes the danger of the green world, because it references humanity as an aggregate force, in which viewers (who likely live in conditions of Western privilege similar to those of the protagonists) have no choice but to include themselves. The “green” quality of this concluding space is also suggested moments earlier in the film when Burnham (Whitaker), the surviving intruder, nearly escapes with the bank bonds by climbing over the mansion’s back-yard ivied trellis, a figure that promises escape into such a world but is ultimately policed like any other boundary of valuable private property. When a SWAT team arrives to rescue the women, Burnham is apprehended and commanded to put his hands in the air and open his palms, from which the bank bonds are swept away by a torrent of rain and wind, returning capital to the earth.



Figure 14 David Fincher, *Panic Room*. Reading the classifieds.

I argue that the loop between closed and green worlds as they appear in the film shed light on Timothy Clark’s notion of Anthropocene disorder, or the “mismatch between familiar day-to-day perception and the sneering voice of even a minimal ecological

understanding or awareness of scale effects” (140). From the perspective of the external, public environment, the protagonists understand the act of human dwelling as a collective, unmanageable force on the scale of the city, while from the confines of the mansion the external world is closed off and the immediate field of perception is restricted to the range of the home(land) and the maintenance of its security. The protagonists’ movement between these spaces completes the loop that Timothy Morton suggests is the fundamental shape of ecological awareness, which is “a loop because human interference has a loop form, because ecological and biological systems are loops. And ultimately this is because to exist at all is to assume the form of a loop” (6). Punctuating each section of *Dark Ecology* with the image of an ouroboros, a self-eating snake (a closed circuit), Morton argues that thinking of individual actions in the context of aggregate humanity is a “strange” loop, in which “two levels that appear utterly separate flip into one another ... a turn of events that has an uncanny appearance” (7). Morton offers the example of turning the key in a car ignition, which he relates to a detective story in which the detective—the individual contemplating the significance of their lives—suddenly discovers that they are in fact one of many criminals unwittingly participating in the destruction of the planet. Clark’s Anthropocene disorder emerges when one is “trying to think the implication of trivial actions in scale effects that make everyday life part of a mocking and incalculable enormity” (140). So the uncanny “strange loop” and “Anthropocene disorder” refer to the same hermeneutic acrobatics required to negotiate between different ecological scales of thought and the potentially negative affective consequences of doing so. Thus, the panic generated by the women’s experiences in the mansion persists not only as a fear of potential home(land) invasion and breakdown of natural security, but also as a side-effect of narrative transit between closed and green worlds and their associated scales. In other words, I am suggesting that the film’s “panic” is generated by the onset of Anthropocene disorder.

Reading *Panic Room* from an ecocritical perspective has shown how its portrayal of the domestic life of individuals can, through cinematic manipulations of scale, space, and language, become mapped onto wider frames of reference needed to understand more global environmental concerns. It invites us to think of the home and the nation not as stable, isolated, protective entities, but rather as spaces and places deeply intertwined with the lives and experiences of others elsewhere. Ultimately, the film does not offer any antidote for the ecological panic it induces, except that it makes the Altmans’ final consideration of a home with a concierge service seem grotesque. It suggests that the closed circuit of class privilege and the maintenance of its natural security remain intact, continually reproducing itself on the scale of the nation with disastrous consequences for the global environment and those in the margins. In the era of Trump and the looming backdrop of the Anthropocene, we need but one glance through the screens that surround us to know that panic now governs our homes.

3.5 Gesture in *Take Shelter*

In his essay “Notes on Gesture,” Giorgio Agamben claimed that with the advent of photography and its evolution into film at the end of the nineteenth century, society lost the expressive essence and cultural power of human gestures, which now exist as imitative phantoms in cinema, a medium that “leads images back to the *homeland* of gesture” (55, emphasis mine). In *Panic Room*, the closed-circuit surveillance feeds of the titular space produced an extreme microcosm of the post-9/11 American “homeland” enmeshed in the climatological feedback loops of national/natural security. In this section, I take Agamben’s notion of the *gestural* homeland—a “sphere of a pure and endless mediality” (58)—as a departure point to examine Jeff Nichols’ 2011 film *Take Shelter*, which profiles a much less affluent segment of the American population than does *Panic Room*, but is no less marked by the paranoid atmosphere of environmental security. Gesture, as I will show, is a key stylistic feature of Nichols’ direction as well as a central part of the film’s engagement with pre-traumatic stress associated with climate change.

Take Shelter tells the story of Curtis LaForche (Michael Shannon), who, like William Cowling of Tim O’Brien’s *The Nuclear Age*, responds to the onset of pre-traumatic visions with the construction of a shelter in his back yard. Set in an unnamed rural town near Columbus, Ohio, the film pits Curtis’ certainty of a coming destructive event against his family’s precarious financial position, which Curtis stresses to its limit with his purchase of expensive construction materials and protective gear. Curtis’ visions, unlike Cowling’s, are less nuclear and overtly meteorological, consisting of flash floods, ominous cloud formations, tornados, thunderstorms with motor oil rain, and swarms of birds undulating in the sky in strange patterns. Curtis’ wife, Samantha (Jessica Chastain), and daughter, Hannah (Tova Stewart), who is hearing-impaired, depend on Curtis’ continued employment at a sand and gravel extraction company for health insurance that will afford Hannah a procedure that will restore her hearing. After Curtis’ increasingly erratic behavior costs him his job, a tornado alarm sends the family into Curtis’ unfinished shelter. When they emerge to discover the world in-tact, they finally determine Curtis’ visions to have been a symptom of hereditary schizophrenia. However, in the film’s final scene, a reversal occurs: the family is vacationing on the beach when a monstrous storm emerges on the horizon. Samantha, who this time can see what Curtis sees, acknowledges his paranoia as valid, suggesting the existence of a dangerous new climate foretold by Curtis’ prior visions.

Nichols uses the sweeping landscapes of rural Ohio as a stage for Curtis’ visions that work as signifiers of climate change. The violent storms that haunt Curtis in dreams and in daytime hallucinations may not initially be real, but they get wrapped up in the family’s financial anxieties as the film gradually explores the space and place of their small town. The field of action is less limited than *Panic Room*, but the film still evokes a confined,

claustrophobic locality that alternates between the family's home, Curtis' worksite, and a few bleak small-town locations such as the grocery store and public library. When Curtis begins constructing his shelter, Nichols restricts the field of action to heighten the psychological importance of this space for containing Curtis' mental anguish. There is a sense that Curtis' visions represent the friction inside a contact zone between the family's locality and the forces shaping it from the wider world, including climate change. Stef Craps correctly states that while the film

does not include any explicit discussion of human activities' producing climate change, the phenomenon's anthropogenic nature is implied by the greasy, yellow rain that is repeatedly shown falling on Curtis's hands, which links the unusual weather he experiences to the world's addiction to oil. (83)

Similarly, Agnes Woolley states that

Unlike the empirical, evidence-based rhetoric in which climate change is most often couched, *Take Shelter* explores the significance of alternative forms of knowledge arising from intuition and insight, presented here as quasi-prophetic. This presents a challenge to the rationalist discourses that have shaped humanity's relationship to nature historically, which are further destabilized by Nichols's aesthetic and generic ambiguity. (177)

Just as Alaimo glossed the metaphorical space between home and nation, Craps' analysis raises the question of how, exactly, the film guides viewers to interpret these small-scale phenomena as indicative of large-scale problems, while Woolley conceals these relationships under the heading of "alternative forms of knowledge."

To create the "links" described by Craps, and to help rationalize the unscientific prophesying of the film described by Woolley, Nichols plays with the relationship between American Sign Language as used in the family's internal communications and the role of meteorological signs as Curtis' indicators of a coming catastrophe. Nichols emphasizes the signifying power of gestures through Hannah's learning process, which guides the way the audience interprets the family's locality as it gets explored and defined by the camera. While Hannah must contend with a lack of auditory sensory experience and learn sign language to access and understand her developing reality (including her father's strange behavior), Curtis learns to read his visions as manifestations of a yet-unknown and dangerous hyperobject that escapes his (and others') normal sensory experience. Thus, I suggest we read the film through the idea of "gesture," which I define to include bodily, environmental, and cinematic forms. Because Nichols' filming style is mostly up-close to the characters, gesture is integral to the film's characterization process at the same time it acts like a binding agent between scenes that create the space of the storyworld. In turn, environmental gestures—such as swarms of birds undulating in figures suggestive of abstract meaning—create a cinematic experience of a kind of

global environmental sensory disability experienced by the adults in the film and, perhaps, its target audience. Reading the film in this way creates a new vocabulary for describing contemporary engagement with climate change in which understanding is a developmental, acquisitional process rather than a fixed epistemological state that inhibits sustained engagement with environmental problems. Under this model, the fallout shelter—directly referenced by Curtis’ add-on to his existing storm shelter—becomes less a refuge for white privilege and more a space to confront unknown signifying systems associated with large-scale phenomena.

3.6 Defining Gesture

According to Adam Kendon, gesture encompasses bodily movements that “have the features of manifest deliberate expressiveness” (15) rather than serving some practical aim such as object manipulation. Gestures are part of any given “utterance,” which may or may not include speech. Kendon positions gesture as complementary to other media systems, explaining that

[h]umans have at their disposal the *gestural medium* which can be used in many different ways and from which many different forms of expression can be fashioned. What forms are fashioned will depend upon the circumstances of use, the communicative purposes for which they are intended, and how they are to be used in relation to the other media of expression that are available. (107)

Kendon subdivides gestures into “gesture units” and “gesture phrases.” A “gesture unit” is the totality of any given expressive bodily movement away from and back to a relaxed position, which may or may not be linked with other gesture units (111). The apex of the gesture unit, at which point the fullest expression of the gesture is achieved, is known as the “stroke.” The “gesture phrase” is comprised of the “stroke” and any decorations such as delays and preparations that emphasize the stroke, but not the “recovery,” the phase following the stroke which returns the speaker to a relaxed state (112). Any given speaker combines the gestural medium with other communicative acts, which in most cases is speech. Kendon also notes the difference between “gesture” and “sign.” The latter term refers to bodily movements with clearly defined referential content (such as those used in sign languages), whereas the former is primarily used to shape expression in other signifying media. Rather than sharply delineate gestures from signs, however, Kendon explains that “languages, whether signed or spoken, may be seen as islands of order within larger seas of sound and movement” (325) of which gesture is a part.

I extend Kendon's definition of gesture to include cinematic and environmental forms, exploring how these categories overlap with characters' bodily expressions in *Take Shelter*. Cinematic gesture involves the expressive "bodily" movements of the camera, along with the deliberate sequencing and timing of scenes created in the editing process. Environmental gesture involves the actions of nonhuman phenomena as they occur in filmed space. Although gestures in these non-corporeal domains undoubtedly exceed the capacity of Kendon's model, the basic form of gestural units, "preparation-stroke-recovery," is useful to understand how Nichols and his filmmaking team use gesture to create a new climatological vocabulary in the cinematic medium. While it is tempting to establish a hierarchy of gestural categories in *Take Shelter*, it becomes ultimately impossible to privilege any form, as each works symbiotically with the others. From a human-centered narrative perspective, environmental and cinematic gesture depend on their entanglements with the human body, and vice versa. Just as bodily gesture is combined with human speech for expressive effect, these other categories of gesture layer with narratological features to create meaning embedded in a gestural-narratological semiotics.

3.7 Bodily Gesture, Locality, and Containment

Before turning to environmental and cinematic forms of gesture, I examine how bodily gesture, frequently raised to the status of the sign in the context of the film's engagement with American Sign Language, pervades every aspect of the film, particularly in the way it helps to evoke the space and place of the storyworld—a gestural, rather than national, homeland—while describing Curtis' declining mental state. Although I widen the scope of Kendon's notion of bodily gesture to include movements unfettered from speech acts and involved in object manipulation, I restrict my examples to include only those where movement seems to be emphasized by the camera or the film's narrative rhythm so as to avoid overinterpreting all movements of the characters. Curtis, in general, is not a very expressive protagonist, so even his most minute movements convey pronounced emotions; and while environmental and cinematic gesture are unquestionably a part of the scenes I analyze, for clarity it is helpful to first begin with the body and then move outward to demonstrate how they work in tandem to create higher-order meaning.

In one of the first scenes of the film, Curtis breakfasts with his family before going to work. As Samantha signs to Hannah, the scene establishes Hannah's hearing impairment while signaling the family's upcoming expenses that later in the film become a source of conflict. After Curtis leaves for work, the film's first storm approaches. Curtis' work gets suspended, while at home Samantha takes Hannah to the window to teach her a new sign

for the occasion, signing the letters for “storm” and then its accompanying gesture. The moment shows how movement gains the status of a sign, while bodily gesture as language becomes a mediation of a complex meteorological event. The protective structure of the house and the transparency afforded the window become a part of that mediacy as Nichols creates a structural homology between the cinematic screen, in which the audience sees Hannah enfolded by the instructive arms of her parent, and the window, a screen through which Hannah begins to understand signifying systems against the backdrop of a weather event (Figure 15). Letters and language get inscribed into the spatial experience of the home and the family’s locality, and just as Hannah learns to read and apprehend the world in this way, Nichols instructs viewers to interpret the storm as one sign among others in a language, not simply a plot event. The move is similar to the way Fincher used language to vault the significance of the panic room into higher-order contexts, and to loop those contexts back into the surveillance feeds of the panic room. Here, a simple word is used to create a bodily and localized experience of language through which to “read” the events of the film.



Figure 15 Jeff Nichols, *Take Shelter*. A sign for the weather.

Later, the family sits at the dinner table while Hannah draws and writes with Crayons, cementing the link between her experience of the grapheme and her acquisition of language. Samantha takes the opportunity to create a playful moment, picking up one of the Crayons and pretending it to be lipstick, first “applying” it to herself and then to Curtis (Figure 16). Beyond demonstrating the fundamental mutability of gender identity and performance, the gesture also models the metaphoric linkages between objects, concepts, and movements. It may seem obvious, but we “know” the Crayon is temporarily lipstick through Samantha’s gesture. But Nichols gives moments like this more significance in accordance with the symbolic logic of the film, in which, I argue, gestures take on meaning of much greater complexity. Crucially, using Hannah’s character,

Nichols positions this logic as *acquisitional* rather than fixed. Such a framework guides viewers to learn, rather than immediately interpret through the lens of preconceived notions, the signs at work in Curtis' visions. Moreover, Woolley's assertion that "*Take Shelter* depicts visual and thematic metaphors of the unconscious," proves to be supported by gestural aspects of the film that make metaphor tangible through such linkages of writing, the body, and the sign.



Figure 16 Jeff Nichols, *Take Shelter*. Lipstick

An earlier scene establishes the first of several employment conflicts caused by Curtis' erratic behavior while cementing the link between bodily and environmental signs. Curtis' boss castigates his team for unfinished work caused by the weather interruption, but distracted from his nightmare the previous night, in which the family dog, Red, attacked Curtis as he gazed out upon a tornado in the distance of his home, Curtis can only stroke his arm where the dream-teeth met his flesh (Figure 17). When the boss asks Curtis for a status update, Curtis snaps back to reality and the scene resumes, but this subtle nonlinguistic gesture reemphasizes and localizes the bodily sensations in Curtis' visions. Nichols positions such actions as part of a gestural vocabulary that occurs regularly throughout the film. Much more than just aftereffects of Curtis' dreams, Nichols ties this emergent lexicon to the pre-traumatic stress stoked by large-scale phenomena, as I will further demonstrate in the next section. Nichols instructs viewers in this vocabulary by infrequently deviating from a close focus on the characters. While claustrophobia may not be enforced by the circuitry of a panic room, Nichols uses this close gestural frame to loop climatological terror back onto the human scale.



Figure 17 Jeff Nichols, *Take Shelter*. Dream teeth.

Dynamics between the space and place of the LaForche family home and external environments are also gestural. Following his nightmare, Curtis decides to put Red (later described as an “inside” dog) outside, building a fenced enclosure around a dog house. Nichols juxtaposes the construction process of this space with Samantha’s endeavors at a local flea market where she sells her embroidery (Figure 18). The establishing shots of the flea market, which focus on Samantha’s hands, are interspersed with cuts to close shots of Curtis’ manipulation of the enclosure’s wire (Figure 19). This technique binds an overt image of containment (both restricting a potential danger *inside* and providing protection from the elements *outside*) to activities that reveal the family’s precarious financial position. This gesturally-mediated visual metaphor invites understanding Curtis’ containment of Red as an expression of his mental anguish and as a model for the state of his nuclear family (Figure 20). These gestures place the local space of Curtis’ home and property (inside) alongside an external environment where commerce and community contact occur (outside). The tying of the fence mirrors Curtis’ gradual withdrawal from this external environment that he perceives as threatening on intersubjective and climatological scales, while Samantha’s reticent haggling emphasizes the restricted financial flows coming into the family that become increasingly endangered by Curtis’ degeneration. Most importantly, the scene re-spatializes the film’s points of conflict in terms of boundaries. The horizons of the LaForche’s town are no longer expansive, but become more like walls or screens onto which climatological gestures and signs take shape.



Figure 18 Jeff Nichols, *Take Shelter*. Embroidery.



Figure 19 Jeff Nichols, *Take Shelter*. Tying the fence.



Figure 20 Jeff Nichols, *Take Shelter*. Containment of Red.

Such elisions of space occur frequently throughout the film, often using music or sound as an additional binding agent between spaces and visual metaphors. In one striking example, Curtis operates a drilling apparatus at his worksite, which cuts away to

Samantha's work with textiles at a sewing machine. The moment is bridged with the similar sounds and mechanics of each activity, but the overall effect homogenizes the differing scales of each space. While Curtis works a job with a deliberately nebulous role in what appears to be a much larger operation, Samantha's work at home is embedded in the hyperlocal. But through gesture, Nichols elides the scales of these different kinds of work, showing how each activity is performed for a wider, but unseen, world of commerce (Figure 21). The effect creates a new kind of local space in which the family's domain consists of occluded margins held beyond sight of the audience. In turn, the signs of coming danger experienced by Curtis become associated with the forces, both climatological and otherwise, beyond this locality.



Figure 21 Jeff Nichols, *Take Shelter*. Elision of occupation.

The relationship between locality, the environment, Curtis' mental state, and the family's financial position is most explicitly evoked when, after being offered the name of a psychiatrist in the neighboring city of Columbus, Ohio, Curtis decides that the trip is too far while filling up the gas tank of his truck (Figure 22). With a shot that lingers on the increasing fuel costs at the pump and Curtis' distressed movements around it, Curtis calls his doctor and asks: "is there somewhere more local you can send me?" The potential solution to Curtis' problems is specifically defined as "outside" his reachable domain, which is directly linked to his finances, vehicular mobility, and use of fossil fuels. The family is shown to be entrapped in "petroleum culture"—"the objects derived from petroleum that mediate our relationship, as humans, to other humans, to other life, and to things" (LeMenager 6)—while Nichols reduces the size of the film's storyworld, gradually converging on the space of the shelter.



Figure 22 Jeff Nichols, *Take Shelter*. Is there somewhere local you could send me?

3.8 Cinematic Gesture and the Fallout Shelter

As previously stated, cinematic gesture involves the “body” of the camera, its movements, and editing techniques that develop filmed segments into linear narrative. This type of gesture is more difficult to define than its bodily and environmental counterparts, but nevertheless plays a crucial role in the interpretation of filmed environments and the bodies that gesture meaningfully within them, particularly inside Curtis’ shelter. Cinematic gesture is concerned with movement in terms of time and duration and, instead of a distant sympathetic relationship to bodies created by the characters as objects of the camera’s gaze, the camera itself offers the first-person experience of gesture to spectators. In her analysis of cinematic gesture, Laura Mulvey uses an example of “delayed cinema” to show how the gesturing body gets wrapped up in a specific technical/aesthetic feature of film, stating that “the body caught in gesture occupies a space and time of its own just as the fragment is detached from narrative linearity or the logic of cause and effect” (7). Mulvey indicates that cinematic gesture is recognizable by its distinctive offset from the consistency and regularity of other technical/aesthetic aspects of any given film. Pinpointing the stroke of cinematic gesture depends, therefore, on some departure from standard timing, camera movement, or stylistic features of the *mise-en-scène*.

In the interest of moving toward the environmental dimensions of *Take Shelter*, I offer one example from the film in which cinematic gesture is used to create the claustrophobic, survivalist atmosphere of Curtis’ shelter. In this sequence, Curtis takes Hannah to collect resources and supplies first from the public library (Figure 24), then from the grocery store (Figure 23); later, Curtis brings these items into his shelter, where

he reads in solitude (Figure 25). Placed in parallel, it becomes clear that Nichols wanted to create a relationship between these spaces: one that represents Curtis' desire "to systematize his unsettling experiences, categorize, and name them" (Woolley 183) through self-diagnosis with mental health books from the library, one in which he attempts to master his dependency on public food supply chains he foresees breaking down, and one that offers his nuclear family protection from the apocalypse. Altogether, the spatial similarity of the shots are departures from the general irregularity of other spaces in the film, with the apex of the gesture peaking in the shelter where Curtis delicately positions his canned goods and books on the shelves. Curtis' activities, which he conducts in secret, are also a departure from a state of relaxation which is alternately enervated and then quelled through these very actions.



Figure 23 Jeff Nichols, *Take Shelter*. Homology 1.



Figure 24 Jeff Nichols, *Take Shelter*. Homology 2.



Figure 25 Jeff Nichols, *Take Shelter*. Homology 3.

As described previously, the space of the fallout shelter is often a synecdoche for the space and place of the nation, particularly as one imagined by middle- and upper-class white men to be besieged by forces that threaten that identity and status. *Take Shelter* mostly retains this meaning with Curtis' shelter, but co-opts this nuclear survivalist space for resistance to climate change, much more obviously than does Fincher's *Panic Room* or Joon Ho's *Parasite*. Nuclear consciousness and memory are not lost, but rather palimpsestic with this space's function in the film, where it works as the local, contained obverse of the occluded workings of the globe: another Edwardian "closed world" in which Curtis, delving into the state of his own mind, learns to read the climate.

3.9 Gestural Mollossus and the Environmental Sign

To illustrate how Nichols combines these gestural forms to emphasize an environmental sign, I offer a brief analysis of a sequence of scenes in terms of Kendon's gestural units. The preparation, stroke, and recovery of each form of gesture in this sequence do not coincide, but nevertheless work together to create a gestural mollossus, a term I borrow from poetry scansion that indicates three successive stressed syllables, which here I apply to indicate three complimentary gestural strokes, one from each category: first environmental, second bodily, and third cinematic. The preparation of each gesture begins at the previous gesture's point of recovery, with each stroke happening in close temporal proximity. While it would be a stretch to say that Curtis is ever in an entirely "relaxed" state (except at the beginning of the film), the sequence begins with the film in a relative state of relaxation with Curtis attending a meeting at a more or less normal day at work. However, responding his nightmare the previous night, Curtis decides to pick up some construction equipment from the hardware store (preparation), and only resumes work afterward. After things go wrong on the worksite, Curtis glimpses a swarm of birds

in the sky, moving in strange patterns, almost forming a symbol of some kind (stroke) (Figure 26). The distraction delays his work further, adding to the subsidiary tension established in a prior scene that Curtis must return home in time for his daughter's sign language class. When Curtis returns late to an angry Samantha, snapping him out of his paranoia (recovery/preparation), the family attends the class, where the instructor teaches the gesture for the sign "father" (stroke), a role that in Samantha's eyes Curtis has neglected to perform well (Figure 27). Later in the class, Curtis signs an apology to Samantha, and the family shares a laugh about Curtis' offensive body odor, diffusing the tension in the scene (recovery/preparation). Following this happy end to the class, Curtis endures a car crash and attack in which Hannah is abducted from him, which turns out to be a traumatic nightmare experienced later that night (stroke) (Figure 28). The following morning, Curtis decides to stay home and recover from the vision (recovery).



Figure 26 Jeff Nichols, *Take Shelter*. The swarm.



Figure 27 Jeff Nichols, *Take Shelter*. Father.



Figure 28 Jeff Nichols, *Take Shelter*. Hannah!

These three beats work in tandem to characterize Curtis, overlay his nightmarish visions with the oscillations of the plot's drama, and to create a relationship between environmental phenomena and signification systems, whereby we can read the bird swarm as a yet-unknown sign. Moreover, each of these gestures is composed of sub-gestures from the other categories I posit: the final cinematic gesture, for example, is combined with the unusual presence of motor-oil rain, as well as a sign from Curtis to Hannah that everything is okay despite the initial crash. The cinematic gesture, which Nichols achieves with a bait-and-switch of a light, relaxed moment (preparation) followed by a violent dream (stroke), helps communicate this gestural homology to audiences by putting the protagonists' actual bodies in physical danger. The gesturing body, in line with Agamben's and Kendon's assertions that gesture is thoroughly entrenched in media systems, itself becomes a medium for the signs of environmental terror. Most importantly, cinematic gesture, in combination with the other forms, re-codes a critical viewer's structural experience of the narrative as environmental. That is, it becomes impossible to experience Nichols' creation of dramatic tension, whether related to Curtis'

apparent psychosis or his everyday interactions with his family, as anything but related to the emergence of a catastrophe that escapes normal sensory experience.

Unlike other environmental gestures in the film, which are predominantly meteorological, the Hitchcockian swarm of birds that move on the “screen” of Curtis’ contained world resembles a mysterious symbol composed of nonhuman agents. Much like the pair of benevolent aliens who teach humans to read a multidimensional language in Denis Villeneuve’s film *Arrival* (2016), here the (earthly) nonhuman world seems to carry a message related to climate change. The gesture draws on the media aesthetic of the “swarm” which, as Jussi Parikka explains, are entities “more than the sum of their parts, without an overarching unity principle guiding the actions of the singularities under one umbrella” (47). As Curtis asks his workmate whether or not he had “ever seen birds fly like that,” it seems that the birds are moving either deliberately into abstract shapes, or their flocking behavior has been co-opted by a message “sent” to Curtis by the climate. In either case, we can understand this collective entity to be governed by what Parikka, discussing bees, describes as “the spirit of the hive”:

an expression of mysticism, a natural theology of a kind ... not as a mechanical habit but as a curious logic that cannot be pinpointed to any specific role, order, or function. [It] seems to be responsible for the abrupt but still recurring collective actions that take hold of the bees (as in possessed individuals) and concert their actions as if they were one. (49)

In a later but connected vision, the birds swarm and attack Curtis and Hannah while falling out of the sky, ending their collective teleological activity. I draw a parallel between the “spirit of the hive” and Ivakhiv’s conception of environmental cinema, in which films, as collectively experienced forms of art (particularly in the space of a theater), also conform to the aesthetics of the swarm. He states that, in environmental films featuring such “unruly visitations of a vaguely threatening ecology” (270),

These unnatural appearances of nature seem more like allusions to a scrambling of the boundaries presumed to exist between nature and humanity, a scrambling in which we ourselves are implicated. Like the threat of global warming, they hover, with a kind of reptilian stare, on the horizon of collective consciousness. (271)

The language of boundaries, scrambling, and hovering are uncannily represented by the swarm of birds, which momentarily represent a functioning (though ominous) totality. Its ultimate dissolution suggests a collective breakdown of the human swarm—of networks, social life, and purpose—caused by the slow violence of climate change.

As a counterpoint to these environmental gestures, Curtis’s shelter represents control and stability for his nuclear family as isolated from the broader social structures of the human swarm. The arc of the shelter’s construction across the film (or, rather, the addition to Curtis’s existing storm shelter) not only corresponds to the increasing

severity of Curtis's visions, but also to the audience's gradual acquisition of the film's climatological lexicon. As viewers decode these gestures' meanings and converge on the significance of the shelter, its construction process becomes a metaphor for the acquisition process itself. Before viewers even determine the veracity of Curtis's visions, Nichols cleverly positions them inescapably as contained subjects. This idea is reinforced in the film's final reflexive scene, in which the final, "true" storm is shown not as a direct object of the camera's gaze, but rather as a reflection that would position the storm in the space occupied by viewers. When Samantha opens the "screen" door and gazes with concern beyond the camera toward the horizon, her concluding acknowledgement to Curtis converts "*Take Shelter*" to an urgent command for audiences.

3.10 *Parasite* and Climate Change

While *Take Shelter* slyly reveals audiences to be the unwitting constructors of their own psychological containment, Bong Joon Ho's *Parasite* uses the fallout shelter as a plot twist to suddenly reformat the experience of local space as contained on a larger scale. *Parasite* is, bluntly, a masterpiece. As both a writer and director of the film, Bong Joon Ho infuses each of its scenes with an extraordinary level of detail and connectivity in a networked metaphoric complex that is beyond this dissertation to fully capture; indeed, other scholars have expressed a similar awe of the film's genius. Of one key scene which I will discuss momentarily, Min Hyung Song states,

So much meaning is subtly embedded in these carefully composed shots, and the music heightens the mood of the moment, making it suspenseful and nerve-wracking in a way that simply reading silently can't recreate.

While many qualities of the film beg for further scholarly inquiry, particularly its attention to class warfare, in keeping with the focus of this dissertation I center my analysis on the film's deployment of the fallout shelter space as its primary dramatic and critical fulcrum. Only revealed to the audience (and the characters) about halfway through the film, the space functions quite differently than it does in *Panic Room* and *Take Shelter*, in which the filmmakers immediately foregrounded its uses for environmental and psychological security. In *Parasite*, those functions are retained, but the shelter consigns a character into a hidden position of abject servitude to those who own the space (but remain unaware of it). At a busy nexus of class conflict in the film, the shelter gets leveraged against other dwellings with varying degrees of vulnerability to severe meteorological events that, just as in *Take Shelter*, signify climate change. The film's setting departs from the American homeland for Seoul, South Korea, and the shelter

works as a lens through which to view cultural forms of containment between and across South Korea, North Korea, Japan, and the United States in terms of a long history of foreign military presence that has shaped contemporary South Korea. Natural security again becomes important as Bong Joon Ho draws out this relationship between the existence of this fallout shelter and global-scale military conflicts between these nations. Meanwhile, local space in the film is marked by cultural imperialism and appropriation, most clearly by the cultural power afforded to the English language within South Korean class structures, as well as the presence of commodified, generalized American Indian material culture.

Parasite tells the story of the impoverished Kim family's gradual infiltration of the ranks of the domestic support staff of the Parks, a wealthy family that live in a palatial home at a much higher geographical elevation in Seoul than the Kims. The Kims, including the father Ki Taek (Kang-ho Song), mother Chung Sook (Hye-jin Jang), daughter Ki Jung (So-dam Park), and son Ki Woo (Woo-sik Choi), orchestrate a masterful social charade to "parasitically" gain control of the Park household's operations while concealing their familial ties from their employers; that is, until discovery of the shelter and its inhabitant threatens to reveal their identities to the Parks. Geun Se (Myeong-hoon Park), who confined himself to the shelter during the house's previous change of ownership with the assistance of his wife and domestic servant to the Parks, Moon Gwang (Jeong-eun Lee), is also a "parasite" on the Park family, and seems to exist only to invisibly light the stairwell of his master, the tech magnate and patriarch Dong-ik Park (Kang-ho Song). Dong-ik's wife, Yeon Kyo (Yeo-jeong Jo), daughter, Da Hye (Ji-so Jung), and son, Da Song (Hyun-jun Jung), live a life of luxury under subtle pressure from Da Hye's upcoming English exams and Da Song's childhood trauma, for which Ki Woo and Ki Jung provide their "professional" support, respectively. Meanwhile, Chung Sook usurps Moon Gwang's job, and Ki Taek becomes the Parks' driver.

Criticism of *Parasite* has extended the film's more or less obvious depiction of class struggle into other contexts. Ju-Hyun Park compellingly describes the film's attention to colonialism, particularly as indicated by the characters' use of the English language to signal and reinforce class structures: "Whereas the Kims live at the mercy of English and the economic system it represents, the Parks' prestige within that economic order is marked by their proximity to the language." The simultaneously punitive and accessorizing power of English in South Korean society, Park observes, is an aftereffect of a long history of the United States' "strategic and financial interests" in the region, in which the United States still maintains a heavy military presence, suffusing South Korea with the cultural power of the United States. This dynamic is captured, Park argues, in Geun Se's "haunting" of the house through the shelter, which is an architectural feature of the home that responds to the possibility of nuclear-scale military conflict. Indeed, as Park states, the space "surfaces war as the condition of possibility which precedes *Parasite* and South Korea's class system ... The very architecture of the house is militarized, and

the invisibility of the [shelter] mirrors the invisibility of the [Korean] war.” Criss Moon and Julie Moon more or less echo Park’s conclusions, drawing out additional links to militarism in the film, adding that the film “must not be reduced to a universalist clash between ‘rich and poor,’ or to the Cold War binary of North Korea vs. South Korea.”

In a different vein, Min Hyoung Song uses the film’s class commentary to open up a discussion about climate change, stating that “*Parasite*’s class narrative hinges on the ways in which environmental disruption exacerbates simmering conflict between the working class and the wealthy.” Key to his analysis are the events following the characters’ (and the audience’s) discovery of the fallout shelter, the dramatic hinge of the film. The Park’s shelter was built by the home’s previous owner and designer, architect Namgoong Hyeonja. Moon Gwang, who served as the house’s assistant for both parties, concealed the shelter from the Parks when they moved in, allowing her to install Geun Se in the space. The unknown existence of the shelter represents not only the Parks’ ignorance of history and memory of nuclear conflict, but also a narrative frame that conceals larger geopolitical contexts involved in natural security. Bong Joon Ho’s reveal of this space is so powerful because it reframes the initial, delicately evoked locality of the Park’s home, creating an even more local (and contained) space borne out of pressure from the nuclear sublime. Just as the Kims infiltrate the world of the Parks, the global geopolitical frame of natural security infiltrates the tidy local narrative experienced by the audience.

3.11 Geographic Privilege and Natural Security

The key sequence mentioned by Song begins when the Parks decide to take a camping trip, and the Kims use the opportunity to throw a celebration for their successful takeover of the home’s operations in the Parks’ absence. Unexpectedly, Moon Gwang returns to the Park residence during the festivities to bring food to her hidden and starving husband, who she has been unable to feed since her firing at the hands of Yeon Kyo (under the influence of the Kims) (Figure 29). (The home’s surveillance equipment is similar to that of the Altman home in *Panic Room*, showing how the boundaries of this private property are equally reinforced with such technologies; Moon Gwang snips the cable of the CCTV camera outside to conceal her entry.) Once inside, Moon Gwang frantically reveals the existence of the shelter to Chung Sook (Figure 30), but the presence of the rest of the family is then revealed to Moon Gwang, who wields her cell phone as a documentary weapon that might expose the family’s true identities to the Parks (Figure 31). She turns the tables of hers and Geun Se’s abjection, using the “send” button on the

phone as a tool to force the Kims into absurd poses, likening herself to a dictator with a finger poised to activate a nuclear launch.



Figure 29 Bong Joon Ho, *Parasite*. I forgot something.



Figure 30 Bong Joon Ho, *Parasite*. Inside the bunker.

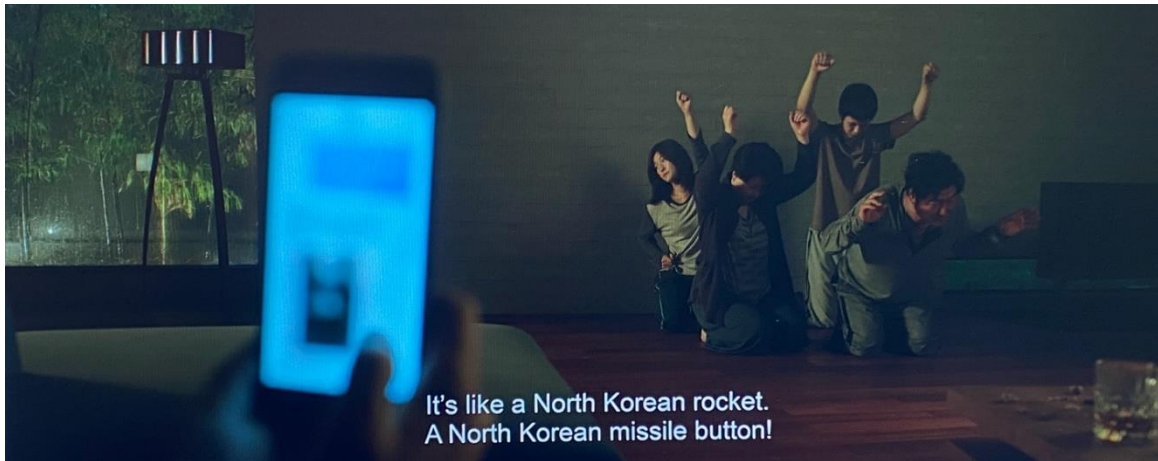


Figure 31 Bong Joon Ho, *Parasite*. Puppets.

All the while, a massive storm has been brewing outside. With their camping plans derailed, the Parks return home unexpectedly, and the Kims are forced to make a violent escape while preserving their charade (with the exception of Chung Sook, who remains in disguise onsite to serve the Parks). As Song details in his article, the rest of the family's journey back home is a long descent into the lower elevations of Seoul, spatially emphasizing the economic disparity between the families. It turns out that this difference in elevation also has environmental consequences. The Kims return to discover their street to be flooded with sewage water, and their half-basement apartment has fared no better. They end up spending the night in a nearby gymnasium with other displaced residents, becoming temporary climate refugees. Song states,

[T]he Kims wading waist high, and then neck high, in water mixed with raw sewage as they try to salvage what they can of their possessions in their home, is a powerful reminder climate change-related destruction is becoming more common and more extreme.

In addition to economic forms of privilege, Bong Joon Ho highlights the existence of *geographic* privilege, in which vulnerability to increasingly severe weather caused by climate change confers advantages upon those who dwell in spaces (presently) immune to it. Curiously, Song states that the Parks' fallout shelter "[is] not relevant to the point [he wants] to make" about climate change, though Song makes this assertion only to avoid spoiling the film's reveal of the fallout for his readers. But sidestepping the shelter passes up an opportunity to connect geographic privilege meaningfully to natural security. In conjunction with Moon and Moon's reading in terms of empire and Park's discussion of militaristic colonialism, natural security is clearly the impetus behind the genesis of this space, though this dimension understandably gets subsumed by the film's more overt nuclear tones. As a subset of the Parks' luxuriously stocked supply room, and though positioned by unusual circumstances as a space of servitude, the shelter is still the centerpiece of a home that only the superrich can afford. As in *Panic Room*, the shelter

represents the final breaking point of natural security, and like the rest of the Park home, remains immune to the vagaries of weather due to its high elevation. At the same time, the film creates a relationship between the Parks' shelter and the Kims' semi-basement apartment. When Ki Taek confronts Geun Se about his life in the shelter, Geun Se rationalizes his suffering: "Well, lots of people live underground," he states, "especially if you count semi-basements." Bong Joon Ho relates these spaces on an axis of class, but clearly delineates their respective environmental vulnerability, reinforcing the desirability of being in close orbit of the Park home.

3.12 The Scholar's Rock and the Screen

Among the possessions that surface in the flood of the Kims' home is the scholar's rock given to the family at the beginning of the film by Ki Woo's wealthy friend Min, the person who initially connects Ki Woo with the Parks (Figure 33). The film self-consciously positions this rock, "the symbol of all of Ki Woo's aspirations for a better life" (Park), as one of the operative symbols in the film, particularly when Ki Woo holds the rock and comically states, "this is so metaphorical" (Figure 32). Beyond its superstitious use for wealth-attraction, and ultimately as the weapon that Geun Se uses to bludgeon Ki Woo to near-death, the rock invites consideration of the ways in which the film anticipates itself as an object of scholarly critique. In other words, the scholarly class is not immune to the film's exploration of parasitic class relations, and even gets wrapped up in intra-class warfare, implicating inert (and, indeed, savvy) criticism in the maintenance of preexisting class structures. The scholar's rock is also a potent symbol of the Anthropocene—the latest epoch defined by the collective human impacts on the geological record, often associated with the planetary effects of climate change. This rock's movements throughout the film, including its brief passage through the fallout shelter (Figure 35), brings the scales of deep time into the dramatic *mise-en-scène* while indicting passive scholarship that does little to upend economic inequality. The rock moves from a position of prestige into the hands of the Kims, suggesting alignment with the plight of their class; in fact, when the Kims' intricate plans lead to nothing, the rock serves only as a hollow symbol of aspiration and seems only to get in the way. When the rock tumbles into the Parks' fallout shelter, scholars (represented by the rock) become aligned with Geun Se's position of extraordinary safety but abject servitude. Rather than class solidarity, the rock (and, by extension, scholarship) serves only as a weapon that "lower" classes use to fight among themselves while the rich continue to party above ground. During the post-storm scene in which the Kims take refuge with their community in a gymnasium, Ki Woo hints at the parasitism at work in the privileged scholarly

perspective on the film: “it keeps following me,” he states of the scholar’s rock (Figure 34). Later, after Ki Taek takes refuge in the secret shelter to avoid punishment for his murder of Dong-ik, Ki Woo decides to leave the rock behind in a stream, ending Ki Woo’s object-cathexis while prompting scholars who engage with the film to know their rightful place of tranquil erosion by forces beyond their control.



Figure 32 Bong Joon Ho, *Parasite*. This is so metaphorical.



Figure 33 Bong Joon Ho, *Parasite*. The scholar’s rock.



Figure 34 Bong Joon Ho, *Parasite*. It keeps following me.



Figure 35 Bong Joon Ho, *Parasite*. The scholar's rock in the shelter.

The film expresses this metatextuality in other significant ways. In Chris O'Falt's interview with Bong Joon Ho and the production designer Lee Ha Jun, Ha Jun reveals that he built the Parks' house so that the window that looks out on the Park's garden is the same aspect ratio as the cinematic screen (O'Falt). This alignment between cinematic screen and dwelling space, echoing Nichols' strategy with Hannah's gestures at the LaForche's window, suggests that the happenings just beyond it model something about the film as a whole. While many of the tableaux appearing here deserve analysis, in the pivotal sequence mentioned above, Da Song puts his U.S.-imported American Indian tipi outside in the rainy garden (Figure 36). Resonating with Park's postcolonial reading of the film, the presence of the tipi suggests audiences are passive (and perhaps unaware) observers of colonialism, blind cultural appropriation, and the unequally distributed effects of climate change. Or, from a different perspective, these messages are so heavy-handed for U.S. audiences that it makes its critiques about U.S. cultural imperialism in South Korea much more stinging: that is, it suggests that these aspects *should not* be subtle; that it is just as obvious as the offensive appropriation at work in the Parks' garden. Just as Yeon Kyo imports fake American Indian paraphernalia from the United States for display on the screen to her garden, U.S. audiences import the film *Parasite* itself,

suggesting an even broader critique of the way films circulate in cultural economies centered on the American context. Given the overwhelmingly positive reception of *Parasite* in the United States, earning it the coveted Oscar for best picture (the first “foreign” film to do so in the Academy’s history), its critiques seem to have reached its target audiences.

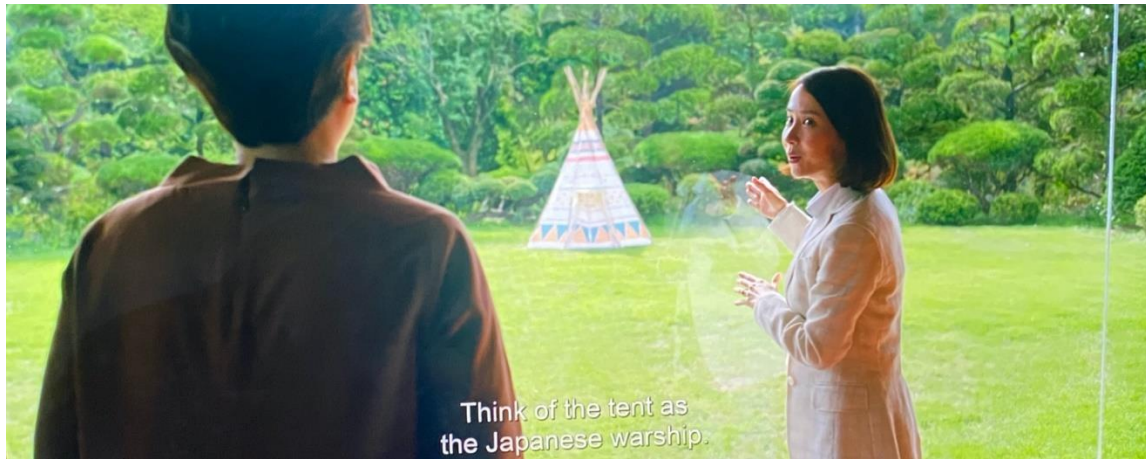


Figure 36 Bong Joon Ho, *Parasite*. The tipi.

Each film discussed in this chapter positions the fallout shelter as the key figure through which to engage with climate change and related global environmental problems. Although the films offer markedly different takes on this space, the fallout shelter’s proximity to messaging about climate change suggests that, although we may be in Ivakhiv’s “post-nuclear” era of filmmaking, the legacies of nuclear conflict have left a wide enough imprint on narrative production to get wrapped up with other global-scale problems. With the minor exception of *Parasite*, none of these films verbally mention the possibility or history of nuclear conflict, yet the space of the fallout shelter infuses their storyworlds with nuclear memory that lends large-scale significance to the local spaces that, at first glance, seem unconcerned with the global environment. Most importantly, each film draws viewers into awareness of their own containment fantasies with respect to the cinematic medium. Articulated through the reflexive properties of the fallout shelter, this awareness is unsettling but necessary if we are to counteract the legacies of containment culture that manifest in the brutal operations of natural security, pre-traumatic stress, and class struggle.

Chapter 4

Containing Trauma

The previous chapter extended Boyle's visual ecology into cinematic space, exploring how the fallout shelter can become an organizing structure for narrative localities to either allegorically or directly engage with features of climate change. I showed how each film offers a spatial, narratological, and/or metaphorical aesthetic vocabulary to evoke the signs and effects of climate change in narrative contexts where it might otherwise go unnoticed, while each film nullifies *cinematic* escapism through reflexive operations. This chapter pivots to the comics medium which, like film, generates meaning through the interplay of language and visual content. I combine the critical approaches developed in the previous chapters to show how Chris Ware's graphic novel *Building Stories* uses the recent historical traumas of 9/11 and nuclear atrocity to frame its pre-traumatic evocation of a locality under pressure from the looming threat of climate change.

Building Stories is a collection of fourteen comics of various sizes and shapes contained in a sturdy box. As with the other texts in my corpus, climate change does not immediately register as a surface-level feature of the story, but, as I will demonstrate, it undergirds the experiences of its unnamed protagonist living in Chicago, Illinois. At first glance, *Building Stories* seems to have only one direct suggestion that the future holds a warmed planet: a weather report from the spring of the year 2156, displayed in the comic's only segment dedicated to the not-too-distant future (Figure 37).



Figure 37 Chris Ware, *Building Stories*. Temperature.

Building Stories does feature other overt environmental commentary, especially engagement with the nonhuman world through the story of Branford, an anthropomorphized bee who must contend with the obstacles in the built human environment. However, Ware scholarship has yet to engage with this graphic novel in terms of climate change. Scholars have productively discussed *Building Stories*' other traits, particularly its unique form, which Jason Dittmer aptly describes as "a dense topology of overlapping narratives" (485). Just as I aim to tease out the key environmental threads from the bleak world of *Building Stories*, I will explore how existing Ware scholarship occasionally comes into contact with the concerns of ecocriticism. For example, Dittmer's discussion of human and nonhuman "urban assemblages" is highly sensitive to *Building Stories*' range of ecologies and timescales, but does not link them to climate change. As I will show, *Building Stories* has much to offer ecocriticism as the field continues to grapple with the complexity of urban environments.

Ware uses the schematic flexibility of comics to portray the psychological depth of the protagonist, while carefully installing the background condition of all narrative action to be a much hotter future planet Earth. This arrangement, whereby the everyday concerns of this protagonist rarely venture into global conceptual territory, while the comic as a whole extends its scope beyond the time and space of individual human experience, demonstrates how the horrors of climate change get psychologically contained in service of maintaining existence along localized patterns of consumerism. Crucially, the comic shapes this picture of containment via the protagonist's repression of a variety of historical traumas including nuclear catastrophe and the September 11 terrorist attacks. It is precisely when the memories of these events emerge in the protagonist's consciousness that her locality temporarily falls apart, allowing for a cross-section of the climate change hyperobject to be glimpsed by readers at the same time that Ware demonstrates this locality to be troubled by the possibility of an "eco-racial disaster" of the kind described in Chapter 1. Using onomatopoeic continuities between symbol, sound, and referent in the narrative space of comics, Ware models a form of containment in which memories of historical trauma and anticipated catastrophe (or "pre-trauma") operate in tandem. This chapter isolates these dynamics in the booklet from the collection entitled "Disconnect," in which the protagonist begins to contemplate global realities that endanger the endurance of her family, prompting a fantasy survivalist response resembling the historical imagination of nuclear fallout shelter use. While there is no fallout shelter depicted in *Building Stories*, I contend that we can read the novel's containing box as representative of this space, especially in light of Paul K. Saint-Amour's analysis of encyclopedic form.

Throughout "Disconnect," narrative fragments from the protagonist's life are organized around extradiegetic graphics placed at the center of several two-page spreads in the booklet. These graphics, which include a dollar bill, full and empty contraceptive pill containers, concave and convex Halloween masks, and an explosion, emphasize key

themes related to the narrative action in the panels surrounding them. Interspersed with these spreads are single-page vignettes with a header featuring the protagonist's progressively aging face, which tracks the passage of time throughout the booklet in broader strokes. "Disconnect" is unique in the collection because its final page features a direct metatextual representation of *Building Stories* itself, suggesting this booklet's importance for interpretation of the graphic novel as a whole. This chapter focuses on Ware's use of the onomatopoeia "BOOM" placed in the center of the second and third pages of this booklet in extradiegetic space, and then on the following page in intradiegetic space. Ware links this word to auditory features of 9/11 and nuclear atrocity at the same time that he uses it to organize and characterize the surrounding panels that evoke climate change, creating a layered narrative experience of both slow and fast forms of violence contained by the racialized psychosocial locality of the protagonist.

4.1 Onomatopoeia and Virtual Trauma

Understanding the structural features of onomatopoeia and how they are used in comics as sound effects elucidates Ware's evocation of climate change in "Disconnect"; moreover, these features get wrapped up in the conceptualization of media systems and their relationship to "virtual" traumatic experience as defined by Marc Redfield. Onomatopoeia, in the "strict or narrow" sense described by Hugh Bredin, is the correspondence between the spoken sound of a word and the sound to which that word refers (555), also known as "direct onomatopoeia" (558). Bredin widens this definition to include "associative onomatopoeia" (560), in which the onomatopoeic word need not refer directly to a sound but rather to a sound associated with a thing or concept. A third sense of onomatopoeia is "exemplary," in which the physical work required to speak a word resembles some quality of the word or that which it denotes (563). While the linguistic nuances of onomatopoeia are complex, it can be extracted from Bredin's work that the essence of onomatopoeia depends on the involvement of speech and the human body, unlike written language far abstracted from contexts in which it might be spoken. We learn something about the sound and concept "BOOM," for example, by speaking the word aloud. Sean Guynes claims that the "onomatopeme" is a fundamental signifying unit of comics that "invoke[s] a narrative erotics that encourages readers to embody the diegesis" (70); similarly, Maaheen Ahmed and Benoît Crucifix note that "the essential building blocks of comics ... are direct outcomes of bodily actions and are thus traces, mediated through various production processes, of bodily memory" (2). Because of its involvement in and conceptual dependency on the auditory sensory environment of the human body, onomatopoeia has a localizing effect: it translates its auditory referent into

the lived space of speech, an important feature when the word's referent is, for example, the sound of a large-scale impact such as a plane hitting a skyscraper or a nuclear blast.

When used as sound effects in comics, onomatopoeia follows the same structural model as "standard" text in comics indicating speech or thought, according to Nimish Pratha et al. (94), who simplify a more complex model developed by Neil Cohn. There are four basic parts to a linguistic communicative act in comics: the *root* that produces the sound (often a human character), the *carrier* or shape that holds the linguistic *content*, and the *tail* that connects the carrier to the root. According to Pratha et al., "the stereotypical sound effect often uses no explicit carrier (the text 'floats' in a panel) nor a tail, though these elements 'exist' implicitly to bind the sound effect to their root – the 'producer' of the sound" (94). While there may be other semantic features involved, for the purposes of understanding "Disconnect," only this basic structure is important, as Ware plays with the directionality of this schema to depict media systems that delivered traumatic events like 9/11 to televisual audiences across the globe.

Building Stories offers a narrative model for the relationship between the semiotic features of onomatopoeia, the use of onomatopoeia as sound effects in comics, and what Lucy Bond and Stef Craps identify as "secondary traumatization," which belongs to the same family as "prosthetic memory" (Landsberg), "visually mediated trauma" (Kaplan 92), "virtual trauma" (Redfield), or "virtual witnessing" (Feldman). Though these terms are obviously not identical, each points to the gap between an initial traumatic event and a mediated, rather than firsthand, experience of it. Jeffrey Alexander describes this "gap between event and representation" as the "trauma process," which he also describes as a "spiral of signification" (11). For its ease of adaptability to the events in *Building Stories*, I understand the trauma process primarily through Redfield's model of virtual trauma, which he develops around the signification practices associated with 9/11. Redfield differentiates the trauma of "the pain and damage suffered by survivors, victims, and the relatives and friends of victims" from the "trauma on a cultural level" inflicted through the televisual mediation of the event. Redfield asserts that in the latter sense, the attacks caused "local damage to the process of symbolization itself" (56), for which he finds evidence in the casualization of particular vocabulary in "9/11 discourse" which for most can only ever "register[] a trauma of mediation and transmission" (57), that is, the gap involved in the trauma process: "a wound that ... exceeds the difference between the real and the unreal" (75). Redfield asserts that

"September 11" is at once traumatic and not quite properly so: it is always also a warding-off of trauma, precisely to the extent that its temporal complexity and spatial diffusion depend upon its global tele-technical diffusion as name ("September 11") and as spectacle. (76)

In other words, virtual trauma refers to a liminal traumatic space between a symbolic state (as a mediated image representing a gap or distance) and a real event (of an indirectly experienced atrocity).

I laminate Redfield's model of virtual trauma with the semiotics of onomatopoeia and the representational schema described by Pratha et al. Direct onomatopoeia, like virtual trauma, both *is* and *is not* its referent: there is some irreducible gap between word and concept that onomatopoeia tries to bridge through a simulation of immediacy. Just as television made 9/11 immediate for billions of individuals across the globe, but did not translate the firsthand experience of the event, onomatopoeia makes immediate, in some sense, the sound to which it refers while retaining its distance as a symbol. Therefore, when corresponding to auditory features of a traumatic event, onomatopoeia becomes a localizing virtualization of the sound concept of that trauma in language. Similarly, when deployed in comics, onomatopoeia is organized on the page through the (usually implied) organization described by Pratha et al., who observe a spatial distance between the *root* and *content* of a sound effect. Organization of onomatopoeia on the page relative to other content signifying a historical (or ongoing) trauma, therefore, becomes involved in this virtual trauma gap, whereby the *root* corresponds to a traumatic event, and the *content* to its virtualization. As we will see in "Disconnect," Ware's use of "BOOM" participates in the trauma process associated with 9/11 and nuclear impacts while structuring other narrative content related to climate change. That is, while the root of "BOOM" is either an icon of the televised 9/11 attacks or a nuclear memory, the word and sound both structure and pervade, respectively, the surrounding content about climate change in the form of narrative "memory shrapnel" originating from the impacts of these events. Put more simply, the root is fluid and multidirectional, but it also brings together historical, mediated, and anticipated traumas.

Understanding comics panels as memory shrapnel originating from explosive trauma invites consideration of work by Christophe Dony and Caroline Van Linthout, who raise broader questions about whether comics are "an appropriate form to convey the memory(ies) of a traumatic experience," particularly 9/11. They conclude that while "comics cannot, aesthetically speaking, represent the 'unrepresentable'" (that is, somehow skip over the trauma process identified by Alexander), they "draw interesting parallels between the breakdown and layout of comics and the structures of traumatic memory" (180). Dony and Van Linthout contend that the "structural features of comics, such as sequentiality and fragmentation, lend themselves particularly well to the fragmented structures of memory and, more specifically, to the structures of traumatic memory" (181). Dony and Linthout never identify what these structures are in detail, mainly relying on the descriptive term "fragmentary" throughout their piece and finding a weak correspondence between fragmentation in comics and the shattering and collapse of the Twin Towers. In an attempt to eliminate this lacuna, I will consider the narrative shrapnel of Ware's "BOOM" in terms of the semiotic structures of onomatopoeia and the

directionality in Pratha et al.'s model, and explore how they re-form to generate a narrative experience of climate pre-trauma. This is, admittedly, a subtle narrative experience, but one that contributes meaningfully to the psychological texture of *Building Stories*.

4.2 Ringing in the Ears: Urban Assemblages and Memory

Before turning to the pages in which the onomatopoeia “BOOM” organizes the mnemonic relationships between nuclear atrocity, 9/11, and climate change, it is necessary to examine how auditory links across spaces and temporalities pervade *Building Stories*, both as onomatopoeic sound effects and as digitally mediated speech, gesturing toward uncertain transformations of space and memory wrought by the connective but alienating presence of digital technology. In the presence of such forces, it would be too easy to claim that the protagonist's locality and sense of containment in “Disconnect” are simply the sum of all spaces that she experiences as extensions of her suburban home. Instead, I position locality and containment in relation to Jason Dittmer's notion of the “urban assemblage,” which he posits as the governing spatiality of *Building Stories*. Assemblages are “heterogeneous collections of objects, discourses, and bodies that are brought into relation with one another” (479), and narratives of the urban assemblage “express the dynamism of the city, with agency distributed amongst a variety of elements and unfolding in a range of temporalities” (478). Using the language of memory, Dittmer states that

The narrative space of urban assemblages is not coherent, but neither is it without connections; it is constantly in a process of territorialization and deterritorialization, with new connections being formed between elements and old ones being forgotten. (492)

Scaling and limiting analysis to the level of the booklet “Disconnect,” which depicts the protagonist at various points in her life amid complex and ever-evolving digital mediascapes, suggests that the notion of the urban assemblage makes defining a stable locality seem unimportant with respect to *Building Stories* as a whole, which as Dittmer asserts, clearly aims to subvert the idea of local spatial and temporal dynamics. Nevertheless, *Building Stories* models a character who is contained and conducts her daily life in terms of some concept of the local. Rather than taking any given subject of a narrative as the center of an urban assemblage, however, Dittmer contends that urban assemblages should be understood through the medium of memory, and vice versa, as “the questions of who remembers, and what is remembered, are crucial to the narration

of urban assemblages” (493). Thus, locality and containment are usefully observed in “Disconnect” in relation to this booklet’s engagement with memory, particularly with regard to historical trauma as evoked through sound effects.

In his analysis of Ware’s oeuvre, Peter Sattler claims that Ware’s aim in *Building Stories* is to render the operations and feelings of memory, and notes that Ware himself has said that “comics is about memory” (207). Although Sattler sidesteps discussing the relationship between memory and trauma as evoked in *Building Stories*, he argues (echoing the language of the urban assemblage) that *Building Stories*

anatomiz[es] memory into its component parts, teas[es] narrative memories away from their visual and episodic counterparts. It then reassembles those pieces within the constitutive mind of the reader, creating cycles and sequences that combine past and present, outsides and insides, image and text. (207)

Of interest in this chapter is the way in which Ware uses sound effects to sketch the contours of the protagonist’s memory and, by extension, the contained world of repressed historical trauma. On the first page of “Disconnect,” Ware develops his use of onomatopoeia as a binding agent (or perhaps interference) between the protagonist’s present sense of alienation and her memories; that in turn forms the basis of her locality. The scene begins with the protagonist in the grocery store, negatively judging others for their dependency on their cell phones while establishing an atmosphere of survivalism that gets amplified throughout the booklet: “[Disconnect] these people from their cell phones and I swear they’d all starve to death...” (Ware, “Disconnect” 1) (Figure 38).

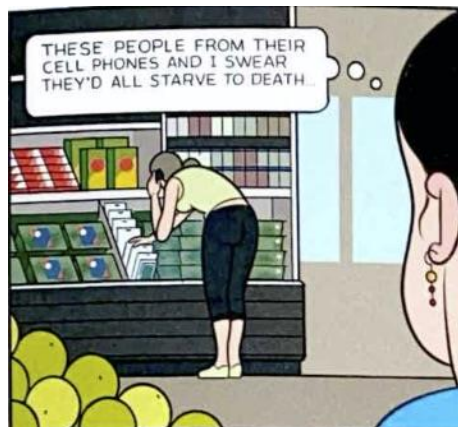


Figure 38 Chris Ware, *Building Stories*. Survivalism.

The protagonist then reflects on the poor state of her marriage. Ware sketches various layers of her cognition by carrying over her present thoughts about her marriage’s lack of intimacy into a cut-away memory taking place in their living room, a moment which is interrupted by the onomatopoeic sound effect “RING,” bringing the scene back into the grocery store. In the second panel, “RING” is partially inside the carrier of the protagonist’s thoughts and partially outside of it, suggesting it does not “belong” to the

protagonist's thoughts (projected into the memory that they evoke). Instead, it sounds in a liminal space, a hidden auditory "layer" between past and present in which the word lacks a fixed root/tail/carrier. The figure is repeated in the following panel, with the root designated as her mobile phone and the sound characterized as electronic by the jagged lines around the word. This auditory layer is only made perceptible by the function of onomatopoeia, which blends the symbolic register of language into the auditory mnemonic space of the storyworld. Although this layer produced by "RING" interrupts the protagonist's daydreaming and returns her to the present, the sound partially belongs to the memory itself, showing how the present is constantly in a multi-temporal dialogue with a remembered past (Figure 39).



Figure 39 Chris Ware, *Building Stories*. Interrupted memory.

Besides establishing the initial link between sound and memory that Ware explores in the rest of the booklet, Ware also uses this scene to illustrate the dynamics between different categories of sound. At the end of the page, the protagonist receives the expected apology and explanation from her husband, speech which is also "electrified" by a jagged tail, giving this speech act the same visual quality as the onomatopoeic bridge between the present and past (Figure 40). In this logic, Ware differentiates the function of different kinds of language, but qualifies them as the same "kind" of digitally mediated sound, expressed in both private and public modalities with respect to the protagonist's subjectivity. That is, while "RING" pervades public auditory space in the storyworld, the husband's words are foreclosed and limited to the protagonist's perception, producing the titular "disconnect" from people in her orbit. Thus, Ware demonstrates how the phone both re-spatializes the protagonist's world in terms of digital communication while saturating the operations of her memory: the present becomes, through these overlapping categories of sound, already a moment to be remembered. Locality, as a consequence, is defined through the invisible auditory link between the protagonist's home and an external environment. The link, as lived memory, *becomes* the locality.



Figure 40 Chris Ware, *Building Stories*. I just miss you...

The locality of the protagonist gets further defined when the sound of her home's doorbell interrupts her puzzlement over where she spent a sum of money displayed on her computer screen. While the sound effect is admittedly less important here with respect to memory, it does represent the mediation of a communicative act across the secured barrier between the protagonist's home—the primary nexus of her locality—and the perceived threats of the “outside” world, represented by the stranger at her door (Figure 41). Just as the localities in other texts in my corpus were demonstrated to be racialized, so too is this protagonist's: after attempting to repel the man, she remarks that “I’m sorry, but **white** homeless guys scare me, for some reason...” (Ware, “Disconnect” 7, emphasis in original). This statement implies that the protagonist is embedded in and adheres to a racial hierarchy in which white vagrancy and/or perceived homelessness is especially frightening, presumably because it is somehow more normal—and therefore comparatively benign—for nonwhite individuals to occupy this position. As I have articulated elsewhere in this dissertation, localities are frequently microcosms of the space and place of the nation, a dynamic Ware invites in this scene by positioning it in relation to the central graphic of a dollar bill—currency headed, of course, by “The United States of America” (Figure 42). If the protagonist's home is a synecdoche for the nation, then belonging to the post-9/11 American “homeland” becomes dependent on property ownership situated within a racial hierarchy. The protagonist assumes that the man at her door is “homeless” simply because he is asking for money; by extension, one's degree of economic need corresponds to an equal lack of belonging to the American homeland.



Figure 41 Chris Ware, *Building Stories*. Visitor.



Figure 42 Chris Ware, *Building Stories*. Money and containment.

4.3 “BOOM”

The alignment of the protagonist's racialized/financialized locality with the space and place of the United States is solidified on the second and third pages of "Disconnect," in

which Ware interlaces digitally mediated sound, memory, and space with the historical traumas of 9/11 and nuclear warfare in order to depict a segment of the climate change hyperobject. The spread consists of a central graphic (the onomatopoeia “BOOM” inside a cloud of dust or debris, the primary root of which is a small television icon displaying an image of the second plane’s impact on the World Trade Center’s south tower) surrounded by short vignettes from a day in the protagonist’s life (Figure 43). Each memory is interspersed with separate narration by the protagonist, who reflects on the state of the world as she cares for her young daughter. These first-person reflections can be understood through Sigmund Freud’s idea of the ego’s protective function, recently summarized by Bond and Craps:

Under normal circumstances, the ego is prevented from being overwhelmed by stimuli from the external world by a protective shield, which enables the subject to absorb (or “bind”) their experiences into a coherent whole. However, in exceptional conditions, “excitations from outside powerful enough to break through the protective shield” (Freud 45) take the subject unawares, causing ‘a breach in an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli.’ With “the pleasure principle ... put out of action,” there is “no longer any possibility of preventing the mental apparatus from being flooded with large amounts of stimulus” (Freud 46). (26)

This language of shielding, boundedness, and coherence is suggestive of the properties of containment. If this idea is extended to “Disconnect,” it shows how Ware contours the locality of the protagonist through her daily activities and remembrances in the orbit of her suburban home, also shaping the “protective shield” from trauma that comes under pressure from the emergence of repressed memories of global atrocity. The family’s financial issues show how fragile and tenuous this protection is. But these very activities—shopping for mass-produced clothing, purchasing gas, home remodeling, watching television, surfing the web—suggest a consumeristic lifestyle implicated in the production of climate change, a realization that seems beyond the protagonist’s awareness but is made more or less obvious to readers through the naivety of the protagonist’s narration and a brief interjection by a corrective editorial presence that recalls Boyle’s engagement with savvy criticism.

Before turning to the protagonist’s reflections, it is important to discuss the relationship between “BOOM” and its schematic roots on the page (Figure 44). Ware links this sound effect to both the events of 9/11 (a television screen displaying the day’s iconic image) and nuclear warfare (the protagonist’s musings about a nuclear-themed Netflix movie). Each root highlights the insulating roles of entertainment culture and mass media. As Slavoj Žižek, Jean Baudrillard, and many others have observed, the 9/11 attacks were “reminiscent of spectacular shots in catastrophe movies, a special effect which outdid all others” (Žižek 11). Redfield finds this tendency to read 9/11 in terms of the “resemblance between reality and semblance, and more specifically between reality

and this particular kind of Hollywood product” to be characteristic of the representational gap inherent in virtual trauma (66), which Ware reemphasizes with his particular focus on sound. In the case of 9/11, billions of people around the world heard the sound of the planes hitting the World Trade Center through their televisions (Bond and Craps 89), but as Corey Creekmur notes, the media frequently removed audio of the events in order to diminish the experience of the day’s horror (84). Even at a basic technological level, official news footage or bystander video could only ever capture the sounds of 9/11 according to microphone capacity, and when funneled through television, these sounds could only be heard as loudly as the maximum decibel output of any given television set. So while it is easy to recognize the attacks visually from almost any perspective, the auditory features of 9/11 are much less iconic due to this dispersal through media systems incapable of reproducing the day’s violent soundscape, which also consisted of “roar[s], screams, cries, and sirens” (Creekmur 84), the precursors to the “belliphonic” sounds of the resultant war in Iraq (Daughtry 3). Thus, the sound(s) of 9/11 were largely left to the imaginations of viewers. Consolidating the audio of 9/11 into the cartoonish “BOOM,” Ware enlarges the virtuality of the attacks by giving the sound effect more space on the page relative to its televisual root. “BOOM” signifies both the imagined sound of the planes’ impacts and the gap (or “disconnect”) between the real event and its representation through media systems. Spoken aloud or auralized in the context of this spread, it is the very inadequacy of this word’s ability to convey the sounds of 9/11 (or nuclear warfare) that gives it power: it references not the impact of the attacks themselves, but the insurmountable virtual trauma gap between event and representation, as localized in the human body through the semiotic features of onomatopoeia.

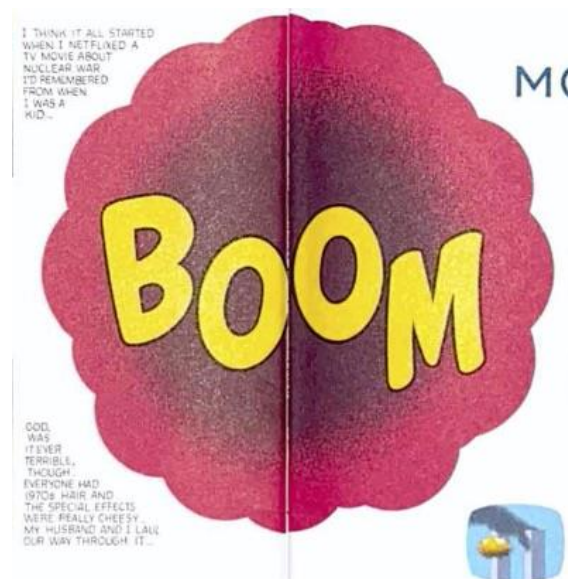


Figure 43 Chris Ware, *Building Stories*. BOOM.

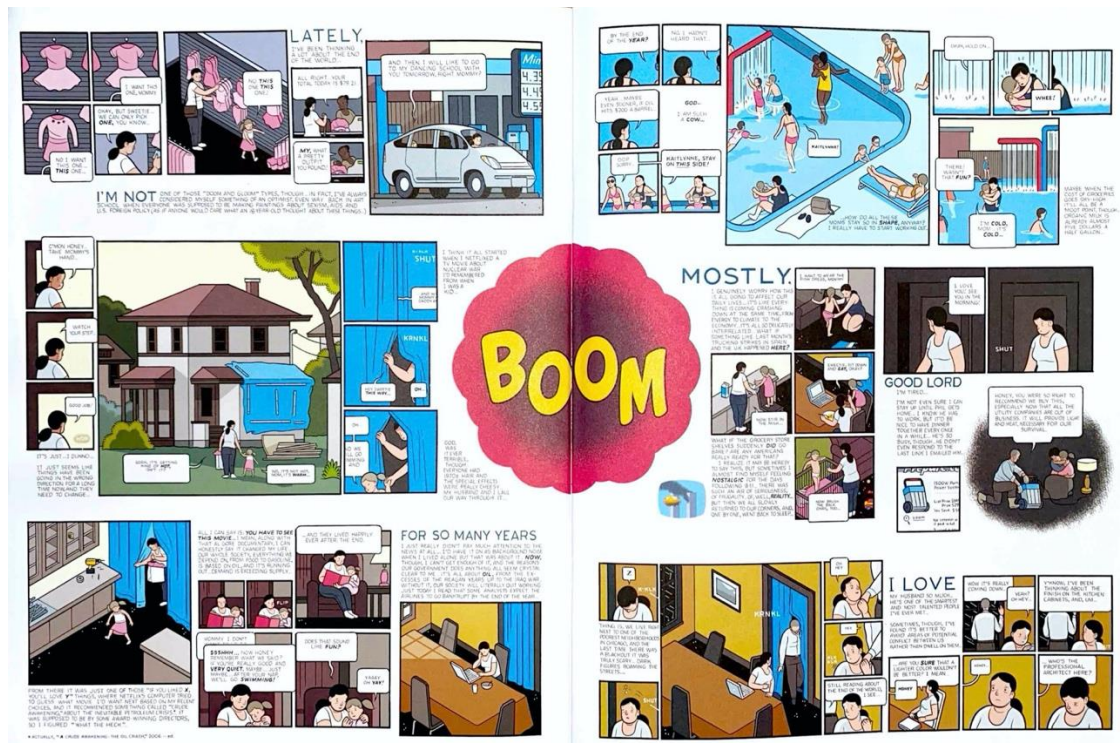


Figure 44 Chris Ware, *Building Stories*. BOOM spread.

In addition to this disconnected relationship to its roots on the page, Ware gives “BOOM” a *carrier* in the form of a cloud of dust or debris signifying an explosion, which implies force vectors radiating outward toward the surrounding panels. Occupying the same extradiegetic “layer” as the protagonist’s narration, the blast seems to cleave her thoughts into the quotidian and the planetary, the local and the global. Her reflections are worth quoting at length, not only because they reveal the entertainment apparatus involved in the apprehension of the events on 9/11 and the history of nuclear warfare, but also because of a phantasmatic editorial presence whose anticipatory rhetorical positioning demands interpretation of the protagonist’s reflections *as contained*:

Lately, I’ve been thinking a lot about the end of the world... I think it all started when I Netflixed a TV movie about nuclear war I’d remembered from when I was a kid... God, was it ever terrible, though everyone had 1970s hair and the special effects were really cheesy. From there it was just one of those “if you liked **X**, you’ll love **Y**” things, were Netflix’s computer tried to guess what movie I’d want next based on my recent choices, and it recommended something called “Crude Awakening,” about the inevitable petroleum crisis*... it was supposed to be by some award-winning directors, so I figured “what the heck”... All I can say is, **you have to see this movie...** I mean, along with that Al Gore documentary, I can honestly say it changed my life. Our whole society, everything we depend on, from food to gasoline, is based on oil, and it’s running out... demand is exceeding supply...

* Actually, “**A** Crude Awakening – The Oil Crash,” 2006. –ed. (Ware, “Disconnect” 2, emphasis in original)

This editorial interjection about a relatively minor misidentification by the protagonist lends authenticity to the protagonist's stream-of-consciousness reflections while making her seem slightly more naïve and governed by the vagaries of recommendation algorithms. That is, the editor (and by alignment, the reader) occupies a privileged and distanced position that the protagonist does not: the seat of the "savvy critic" described in Chapter 2. In this case, however, the editor's correction seems almost petty, even ironic, perhaps indicting readers who accept the escape of such an extratextual position without calling into question their own consumeristic dwelling habits that resemble the protagonist's. It is also problematic that the documentary under discussion along with "that Al Gore documentary," *An Inconvenient Truth*, are actual documentaries available for consumption by readers themselves, implicating them in the same entertainment complex that psychologically shields the protagonist from global problems. In any case, the protagonist demonstrates awareness of her state of containment while indicating the problem is somewhat deeper than it appears:

I realize it may be heresy to say this, but sometimes I almost find myself feeling **nostalgic** for the days following 9-11... there was such an air of seriousness. Of frugality... of, well, **reality**... but then we all slowly returned to our corners, and one by one, went back to sleep... (Ware, "Disconnect" 3, emphasis in original)

This "reality," of course, was merely the temporary interruption of the "everyday schedule and ritualized flow" of television's "logic of consumption" (Spigel 237). For the protagonist, the lived space of containment as entertainment culture is a source of frustration and boredom, but her longing for the atmosphere of 9/11 suggests a more troubling degree of containment, in which what she perceives to be "reality" is actually a collective response to virtual trauma in which the violence of the attacks is still somehow not entirely real. In referring to the return to "corners," the protagonist uses the spatial language of locality to convey a general sense of social alienation and an acceptance of the simulative world of entertainment culture that she, like many others, apparently never escaped.

"BOOM" reappears on the following page, this time as a sound effect in intradiegetic space resulting from an extreme weather event (Figure 45). The transit of this sound effect from extradiegetic space to intradiegetic space marks a breach of the protagonist's containment within entertainment culture. The protagonist initially experiences the sound as an acousmatic blast, and quickly jumps to conclusions about its origins in a panicky state:

My thoughts, in order of appearance: a bomb... a bomb has gone off downtown... the Sears Tower has been bombed and people are dying right now and in a few seconds a nuclear fireball will sweep over us... but... sound is slower than light... right?... light travels faster than sound, the sound of car alarms going off in the dark... lightning... (Ware, "Disconnect" 4)

Her previous ill-placed nostalgia for 9/11 gives way to a visceral fear that a skyscraper in *her* vicinity may have been bombed with nothing less than a nuclear weapon, and that *she* is in potentially mortal danger. In this instance, mediated by nothing more than the windows of the protagonist's house, "BOOM" functions not as an onomatopoeic translation of virtual trauma but as a sound loud enough to convert virtual trauma to a real experience of terror. Riffing on Redfield's model, I suggest we interpret the protagonist's reaction as "virtual PTSD," in which memories of mediated violence are triggered—and made more real—by a phenomenon that resembles the original violence in some way. That the phenomenon in this case is produced meteorologically suggests we can connect the auditory magnitudes of 9/11 into our understanding of climate "pre-trauma," so long as we understand this instance of extreme weather as an indicator of future disrupted weather patterns caused by climate change.



Figure 45 Chris Ware, *Building Stories*. Intradiegetic BOOM.

4.4 Pre-Trauma, the Fallout Shelter, and Encyclopedic Form

Using "BOOM," Ware maps the distance on the page between the epicenter of event-based trauma (the *root*) and anxieties about the future (the *content*) onto a radial gradient from fast to slow forms of violence. The protagonist's reflections, emanating from this explosive auditory memory, are interspersed with a narrative thread from a single day in

the protagonist's life in which climate change is evoked as pre-trauma. This arrangement demonstrates how pre-trauma does not exist in isolation, but rather emerges out of world events that shattered hyperlocal constructions of space and place encouraged by suburban modes of dwelling. E. Ann Kaplan links the condition of climate pre-trauma to psychological fallout from 9/11, noting how the event "seriously destabilized an American society that had previously seen itself as secure and invulnerable" (13), finding many pre-traumatic narratives haunted by the "terrorism and political revenge" associated with this event (19). Using the fibers of entertainment culture, Ware bridges the historical traumas of 9/11 and nuclear war with the protagonist's daily activities, which are symptomatic of pre-traumatic stress disorder. After shopping, driving, and buying gas, the protagonist and her daughter walk into their suburban home and have an exchange about the warming weather: "Gosh, it's getting kind of **hot**, isn't it?... No, it's not hot, Mom, it's **warm**..." (Ware, "Disconnect" 2, emphasis in original). The protagonist subsequently fantasizes about preparing for societal breakdown. In an image resembling use of a fallout shelter, she clutches her daughter while her husband states, "Honey, you were so right to recommend we buy [this generator], especially now that all the utility companies are out of business. It will provide light and heat, necessary for our survival" (Ware, "Disconnect" 3) (Figure 46). The protagonist imagines buying the generator from what appears to be the website "prepare.com," demonstrating the availability of quick antidotes to pre-trauma under contemporary consumer capitalism. On the following page, the protagonist struggles with her husband's minimization of her worries, causing her to reflect further on their family's readiness for the future:

I don't see what's so wrong with being, well, **prepared**... we talked about planting a garden a little while back, but it's getting sort of late in the season for that now, and without a fence around our yard it wouldn't be safe from thieves, anyway... Then again, I will admit that it's a little hard to stay calm after reading a blog about how many days it will take for riots to break out if the food supply is cut off... one guy said he wouldn't hesitate to kill someone for a bottle of water if he knew his own child was dying of thirst... I mean, what am I supposed to think about **that**? (Ware, "Disconnect" 4, emphasis in original)

The protagonist's focus on water availability echoes the resource survivalism seen in "The Shelter," discussed in Chapter 1. Rather than being responsive to a nuclear threat, however, the protagonist's concerns are rooted in more gradual forms of societal breakdown. Her worries do not manifest in the creation of a fallout shelter, but exhibit a similar isolating paranoia as Curtis's in *Take Shelter*, discussed in Chapter 3.



Figure 46 Chris Ware, *Building Stories*. Fallout shelter.

While there is no actual fallout shelter depicted in *Building Stories*, and its nuclear content is admittedly understated when compared to its engagement with 9/11, I contend that the paratext of its sturdy box represents this space. Besides displaying eye-catching graphics to attract the gaze of potential buyers, the box is foremost a *container* designed for the preservation and survival of Ware's ambitious project. Without it, the story would not cohere, and indeed would be impossible to neatly deliver to a reading public on account of its eclectic print morphology, which ranges from a fold-up game board to large-format newsprint. Scholarship on *Building Stories*' form often neglects sustained discussion of this box in favor of the more puzzling topologies contained inside of it, but it is the box that enables Ware's experimentation in the first place. It encapsulates and sustains the totality of all possible reading experiences afforded by its status as "shuffle literature," which refers to the novel's ability to generate a unique narrative encounter depending on the reader's order of object selection (Ghosal 80). The box of *Building Stories* also aims to preserve the experience of print narrative in the face of the uncertain evolution of digital forms of storytelling by re-anchoring readers in the "haptic, visual, and sensory qualities" of physical text (Kashtan 420), which also concerns the preservation of the reading body, according to Torsa Ghosal, who finds a "threefold analogical relation among the book-object, the human body, and the novel form" (76). Referring to the capacity of *Building Stories*' box to bound its disparate, easily misplaced elements, Ariela Freedman suggests that the "anticipation of loss is built into the book's very structure" (340), and Ware himself "wanted to make a book that had no beginning or end" (Freedman 337). Benoît Crucifix argues that *Building Stories* subscribes to a "database aesthetic," in which it self-reflexively positions itself as an archive (15). These formal characteristics of *Building Stories*, all of which are concerned with the question of preservation and survival in some way, are even articulated by the protagonist, who during a dream depicted on the final page of "Disconnect" (in a section entitled "Browsing") discovers her own book, which has a form identical to *Building Stories*, in a bookstore:

Someone had published **my** book! ... and it had **everything** in it... my diaries, the stories from my writing classes, even stuff I didn't know I'd written... everything I'd forgotten, abandoned or thrown out was there... everything... and it wasn't—I

dunno—it wasn't really a **book**, either... it was in... **pieces**. Like, books falling apart out of a carton, maybe... but it was **beautiful**... it made **sense**..." (Ware, "Disconnect" 20, emphasis in original).

In this dream, the protagonist is delighted to find that the totality of her life's output has been catalogued and saved. As a direct metatextual reference to the novel as a whole in relatively close proximity to the protagonist's pre-traumatic stress, this moment suggests that the form of *Building Stories* be understood in terms of the survivalist, preservationist fantasy of the fallout shelter, a figure that elsewhere I have directly linked to pre-trauma.

In the way that the protagonist's dream of saving "everything" mirrors the aim of the novel as a whole, *Building Stories* becomes a late example of the modernist encyclopedic aesthetic, which Paul K. Saint-Amour describes as consisting of "monumental works, seeking to capture a whole city or society within their pages" in response to the ravages of historical total war and pre-traumatic interwar, which lingers today in the form of "perpetual interwar" (302), or the repeating cycle of a "real-time experience of remembering a past war while awaiting and theorizing a future one" (305). This encyclopedic impulse is a symptom of the pre-traumatic syndrome he explores throughout his study, but unlike Kaplan, Saint-Amour does not initially extend his version of pre-trauma to encompass the existential threat of climate change, which is perhaps beyond the scope of his already robust study.¹ He does, however, use the fallout shelter as a figure to characterize Cold War archival mania, which he contends is rooted in an encyclopedism that "expanded the logic of the backyard fallout shelter to the scale of a civilization's informational legacy" (181). While the aim of *Building Stories* is not on such a grand scale, reading its form as a fallout shelter—one that responds not only to the possibility of future (nuclear) war and societal collapse, but also to everyday negotiations of *climate change*—suggests, perhaps, a contemporary transformation of Saint-Amour's encyclopedic form that responds to slow violence in addition to wars in which human actors are agents of deliberate and swift destruction. But how might we describe such an updated encyclopedism?

4.5 Beyond "Disconnect": Infrastructural Reading

I have, through extreme focus on only one of the comics contained in *Building Stories*, artificially "disconnected" my analysis from much of the content that makes this graphic

¹Saint-Amour does, however, more explicitly link pre-trauma to climate change in a peripheral *New York Times* article ("Waiting for the Bomb to Drop").

novel interesting to read from an ecocritical perspective, particularly its focus on the nonhuman (though anthropomorphized) ecologies of Chicago and its schematic drawings of ecological relationships. This desire to isolate, take refuge, and *disconnect* into a small part of an overwhelming totality is precisely the impulse that sparked the genesis of the fallout shelter. The destiny of the urban assemblage narrative, however, is that such worlds continue to be developed and reprocessed in myriad combinations with other content. In title, *Building Stories* not only denotes the architectural focus of its narrative, but also calls on readers to participate in an ongoing reconstruction project, whereby we reassemble fragments of reality blasted apart by explosive historical traumas such as 9/11. Continuing to parse the expansive world of *Building Stories*, we become “infrastructural” readers (Davies 30) who join narrative nodes, merge disparate plotlines, and regulate chaotic affective traffic while extracting new schematics to understand the new ecologies on the other side of our respective fields of containment. It is the nature of this process to exceed the capacity of its container as it takes on new and unexpected shapes, consistent with works in the encyclopedic form, which, though offering a temporary “refuge from anxiety and history,” are also “thoroughgoing vandals of their own totality-claims” (Saint-Amour 10). While the success of this reconstructive process is questionable in the limited space of a cardboard box, such containment affords the creation of new vectors for a reality in which our indifferent planet can become a *connective* space for disparate subjectivities and world-models.

Conclusion: The Bully, The Billionaire, and the Invisible Man

This thesis began with a teleological question about how we direct our lives against the backdrop of the Anthropocene. Identifying *containment* as the material, cultural, and psychological reflex against existential uncertainties associated with climate change, this thesis selected the fallout shelter as the primary medium through which to explore this concept in a wide gambit of novels, television, films, and graphic narrative. Texts that feature the fallout shelter alert readers and spectators to a hidden rhetorical situation in which we produce and consume narrative as *contained subjects*, converting pleasurable literary and cinematic escapism into a psychological survival tactic in the face of global existential threats. Containment as it exists today is influenced by the legacies of *containment culture*, which Chapter 1 demonstrated to be focused around the racist imagineering of the fallout shelter during the Cold War. In contemporary novels like T.C. Boyle's *The Terranauts*, discussed in Chapter 2, updated fallout shelter spaces respond to climate change in addition to the threat of nuclear annihilation. Boyle works against the persistence of containment culture by catching savvy critics off-guard through careful manipulations of irony and the creation of a visual ecology that escapes the typical vectors of containment. Taking the idea of visual ecology into cinematic space, Chapter 3 offered three close readings of post-9/11 fallout shelter films that position containment in relation to the United States' interests in maintaining natural security and global cultural hegemony, while creating a new cinematic, aesthetic vocabulary for understanding climate change. The final chapter examined a translation of the fallout shelter into literary form, arguing for a new practice of "infrastructural reading" that counteracts the legacies of containment culture, confronts historical trauma, and re-formats containment toward connective and communitarian aims. Each text in my corpus uses the fallout shelter to draw readers into an awareness of containment, challenging the unquestioned, persistent attitudes and beliefs inherited from Cold War containment culture. While containment is necessary to continue life in Anthropocene, fallout shelter cli-fi augurs for a severance from its historical incarnations, moving

toward a more capacious, inclusive, and environmentally-conscious form that might avert the worst of human suffering in the coming decades.

As I was finishing this thesis, however, new troubles for humanity arose. The emergence and spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as a global resurgence of interest in the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement following the murder of George Floyd, have further complicated the idea of containment and reignited the racist mentalities of Cold War containment culture. During the period of successive “lockdowns” beginning in March 2020 across the globe, individuals and families found themselves literally contained by their dwelling spaces, and in many cases required special documentation from their governments to simply leave their homes. Meanwhile, BLM demonstrations demanded hasty assembly of large groups of people to protest police brutality, a combination that called into question many governments’ degree of control over citizens’ actions. On one hand, the United States has the right to assembly enshrined in the Constitution; on the other hand, public health directives necessitated collective quarantine. While many countries have since emerged from these extreme but necessary lockdown measures, BLM protests continue, particularly in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. In Seattle, Washington, for example, protestors created the “Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone” in June 2020: a six-block region in the hipster quarter of Seattle that represented a new, communitarian figure of containment. While it lasted, the Zone held the fleeting promise of a new economic system that might replicate and grow to negate the growth demands of petrocapiatalism. Unsurprisingly, by July 1, the Zone was dissolved and the status quo resumed its reign.

Where containment comes into question, a fallout shelter is likely in proximity. Indeed, only a week prior to the Autonomous Zone’s establishment, President Donald Trump responded to BLM protests in Washington, D.C. by descending (retreating) into the Presidential Emergency Operations Center (PEOC) beneath the White House. The PEOC was originally built by Franklin D. Roosevelt during World War II to resist aerial attacks, and is presently staffed by military personnel and equipped with communications equipment that make continued governance of the United States possible in the face of national or global catastrophe. It is a veritable “panic room” for the White House, concentrating national (and natural) security directives into the iconic residence of power in the Western world (though the events of the past four years have severely damaged that iconic status). Trump claimed his use of the shelter was only an “inspection” (Liptak and Klein), but the timing in relation to the BLM protests would suggest that the ultimate “sanctum of white privilege” was feeling mildly besieged (Rhodes 53).¹ Following his emergence from the PEOC, Trump walked to a nearby church

¹ Social media contrasted Trump’s dimming of the White House floodlights to Obama’s comparatively inclusive display of pride-flag colors on the White House facade.

to hold aloft the bible (upside down), a visit that was “preceded by police and other law enforcement officials clearing the square of peaceful protesters using chemical sprays and flash grenades” (Liptak and Klein). The sequence of events would have been the perfect allegory of containment culture had they not been painfully real, had real bodies not been on the line in this funeral procession for democracy. Nevertheless, the moment was widely taken up by journalists and social media to characterize the Trump administration as the ascendance of a pseudo-theocratic fascist state.

While the aims of this new Trumpian state are unquestionably oriented toward enhancement of the ultra-wealthy classes, climate change denial, and the creation of an isolationist white ethno-state, the original teleological question still lingers: what good aim could there possibly be in the development of such a state and its likely continued degeneration into eco-fascism? Even the billionaire class seems to have doubts about its success. According to Edwin Heathcote, roughly 50 percent of tech billionaires have acquired bunkers or getaway islands. Some of them are even marketed as “luxury” bunkers, such as the Survival Condo Project near Wichita, Kansas. These bunkers are far from the bleak survivalist spaces seen in fallout shelter cli-fi:

LED screens offer a window on to a fantasy outside world of trees and waterfalls (not the actual, frazzled and burnt-out landscape). The communal facilities include a climbing wall, dog park, pool, cinema and shooting range (of course). They also provide hydroponic and aquaponic agriculture and aquaculture, and the machinery to filter air and water indefinitely. These are bunkers for the long haul: five years or more completely off-grid. (Heathcote)

Perhaps most emblematic of this trend is the Trident Lakes complex near Dallas, which Garrett describes in detail:

a one-square-mile plot incorporating six hundred semisubterranean condominiums ranging in price from \$500,000 to \$1.5 million, will boast resort-style amenities, including a one-hundred-square-foot equestrian center, a golf course, a spa, restaurants, and retail outlets. An eight-foot security wall made of shipping containers will enclose eight hundred fifty reinforced, subterranean luxury condominiums, a navigable tunnel system, a shooting range, a school, a DNA vault, and helipads. The phases of the construction are named after Italian medieval towns—Lucca, Perugia, Montagnana, Verona—to add a splash of upmarket Euro chic. (94)

These grotesque reincarnations of the fallout shelter are powerful symbols of attachment to Cold War containment culture. Their very existence, as a last-resort option for the wealthy, is part of the maintenance of that culture; they exist as shrines to the dominant order, microcosmic models for the “good end” of capitalistic society that, should the world fall apart, will provide a template for its reconstruction.

Some members of the billionaire class have even considered the possibility of getaway *planets*. Elon Musk, founder of Tesla Motors and SpaceX, has proposed detonating nuclear weapons on Mars's polar ice caps to create two "tiny pulsing suns" over each region that might help to provide liquid water for the planet and to create an atmosphere (Herron 555). While literary critics busy themselves with textual containment, the billionaire class seeks escape from this planet's present and ongoing miseries to create what can only be described as a planetary-scale fallout shelter. In a strange reversal, however, the annihilative potential of nuclear weapons transforms into humanity's technological salvation.² Of interest to this thesis is the fact that an individual billionaire, supported by world powers that facilitate the accumulation of such grotesque levels of wealth, would consider enacting such a program in the face of widespread Earth-bound suffering. It speaks to a kind of containment culture raised to the nth degree, in which such levels of capitalistically accumulated resources (that is to say, wealth derived from the collective labor of the masses securitized as stocks) are so profound a form of psychological and existential insulation that the idea of redistributing these resources toward humanitarian aims is apparently unimaginable. Musk's project is the extension of Morton's "agrilogistics" into space (Morton, *Dark Ecology* 38), the American Dream for a new cosmic suburb, a White Flight to the Red Planet.

I conclude this thesis with a brief meditation on Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible Man*, which offers a historical alternative to these contemporary white-centric fallout shelter containment fantasies, and helps organize a path forward beyond Cold War containment culture.³ Recently considered to be an early example of Afrofuturism by Lisa Yaszek, the novel is narrated by an unnamed African American protagonist from within the confines of an underground room in Harlem, New York that has morphological resonances with the fallout shelter. The narrator's dwelling space is not a subset of preexisting suburban luxury or a last-resort refuge from societal collapse, but rather represents the other side of containment culture's racially exclusionary boundaries: a space of endurance, imagination, and possibility rather than fear, isolation, and foreclosure. As the narrator explains, "I live rent-free in a building rented strictly to whites, in a section of the basement that was shut off and forgotten during the nineteenth century" (5), an arrangement that recalls Geun Se's hidden position of abject servitude to the Parks in

² Of course, thermonuclear geoengineering is far from a new concept: in the late 1950s, the US Atomic Energy Commission contemplated using nuclear weapons to create an artificial harbor in Cape Thompson, Alaska, a project that was only prevented by Native Alaskan activism (O'Neill). Current evidence would suggest there are not presently any native populations on Mars to resist such a project.

³ *Invisible Man* was among a list of five books recently banned from school libraries and literary studies curricula in the Matanuska-Susitna region in Alaska (a decision later overturned after public outcry). Jim Hart, a federal employee and one of the school board members who voted to remove *Invisible Man*, confessed that he had never read it. (Hollander)

Parasite, but along an axis of race rather than class. However, the narrator immediately counteracts our expectations about what such a space looks like:

My hole is warm and full of light. Yes, *full* of light. I doubt if there is a brighter spot in all New York than this hole of mine, and I do not exclude Broadway. Or the Empire State Building on a photographer's dream night. But that is taking advantage of you. Those two spots are among the darkest of our whole civilization ... Perhaps you'll think it strange that an invisible man should need light, desire light, love light. But maybe it is exactly because I *am* invisible. Light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form. (5)

Before the narrator tells the long story of how he ended up in this space, he repositions readers' coordinates of lightness and darkness: his room is not some underbelly of civilization, not a bleak fallout shelter, but a luminous (though hidden) beacon, while the typical cultural emblems of artistic and capitalistic aspiration are described as "the darkest of our whole civilization." In the concluding section of the novel, which returns to this space after the narrator's retelling of his long journey through a white-dominated world, the narrator considers the future in what might be considered a treatise against Cold War containment culture:

Yes, but what is the next phase? ... I assign myself no rank or any limit, and such an attitude is very much against the trend of the times. But my world has become one of infinite possibilities. ... Step outside the narrow borders of what men call reality and you step into chaos ... or imagination. ... [D]iversity is the word. ... America is woven of many strands; I would recognize them and let it so remain. It's "winner take nothing" that is the great truth of our country or of any country. Life is to be lived, not controlled; and humanity is won by continuing to play in the face of certain defeat. Our fate is to become one, and yet many. (435)

Ellison's protagonist represents through this underground space a model to reformat containment culture's original directives. These more positive aims of inclusivity, diversity, and endurance may be articulated from a position of confinement and social obscurity caused by the brutality of 1950s containment culture, but they represent the ideals of a better containment we can all strive for, "a space outside linear time where [we] can begin to rewire the relations between past and present and art and technology" (Yaszek 297). As climate change continues its slow and ominous march toward our verdant world, we can prepare ourselves by continuing to develop a *new* containment culture that brings everyone, human and non-human, under its protection.

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Summary

Containment and Nuclear Memory in Contemporary Climate Change Fiction

Confronted with the global existential threat of climate change, human subjects in the Anthropocene must grapple with a parallel teleological crisis: how do we direct ourselves as individuals and collectives in the face of an ongoing global catastrophe? To answer this question, this thesis seeks to understand the material, cultural, and psychological mechanisms that authenticate meaningful action toward large-scale, systemic changes that might forestall the worst effects of climate change. This thesis names these mechanisms *containment*, exploring how contemporary climate change fiction, or “cli-fi,” uses the metaphorically flexible figure of the fallout shelter to help negotiate a relationship to the scale, complexity, and horror of climate change. The fallout shelter is inflected with the legacies of Cold-War *containment culture*, which developed in response to the similar existential threat of nuclear annihilation. Originally, containment culture was associated with resistance to the perceived threat of communism, but its ideological principle of defensive exclusion replicated throughout society, creating racially exclusive suburban *localities* that came to stand in for the space and place of the American nation. Contemporary cli-fi featuring the fallout shelter necessarily grapples with containment culture in its efforts to capture and manage global-scale problems, often in hyperlocal contexts. Such fictions position readers and spectators as *contained subjects*, converting pleasurable literary and cinematic escapism into a psychological survival tactic against the backdrop of the Anthropocene. This thesis also aims to broaden ecocriticism’s understanding of what cli-fi can be, selecting texts from a variety of narrative media that center the fallout shelter space as their primary dramatic fulcrum. While many of the texts examined in this thesis appear to have little to do with climate change, understanding them through the lens of containment demonstrates how climate change can be rendered in modalities beyond the apocalyptic imaginary. This thesis concludes by examining recent real-world deployments and imaginings of the fallout shelter, suggesting that containment culture persists in a more globally-conscious (but potentially more dangerous) fashion.

Samenvatting

Indamming en Nucleaire Herinnering in Hedendaagse Fictie

In confrontatie met de wereldwijde existentiële dreiging van klimaatverandering worstelen mensen in het Antropoceen met een parallelle teleologische crisis: hoe sturen we onszelf als individuen en als collectief in het licht van een aanhoudende wereldwijde catastrofe? Om deze vraag te beantwoorden, tracht dit proefschrift de materiële, culturele en psychologische mechanismen te begrijpen die betekenisvol initiatief voor grootschalige, systemische veranderingen bekrachtigen die mogelijks de ergste effecten van klimaatverandering kunnen voorkomen. Dit proefschrift omschrijft deze mechanismen als *containment* (of indamming) en onderzoekt hoe de hedendaagse klimaatveranderingsfictie, of 'cli-fi', de metaforisch flexibele figuur van de schuilkelder gebruikt om de relatie met de omvang, complexiteit en gruwel van klimaatverandering te onderbouwen. De schuilkelder is nauw verbonden met de erfenis van de *containmentcultuur* uit de Koude Oorlog, die zich ontwikkelde als reactie op de vergelijkbare existentiële dreiging van nucleaire vernietiging. Oorspronkelijk werd de *containmentcultuur* geassocieerd met verzet tegen de vermeende dreiging van het communisme, maar het ideologische principe van defensieve uitsluiting werd door de hele samenleving beantwoord, waardoor raciaal exclusieve *localities* ontstonden die in de plaats kwamen van de ruimte en plaats van de Amerikaanse natie. De hedendaagse cli-fi waarin de schuilkelder voorkomt, worstelt noodzakelijkerwijs met de *containmentcultuur* in haar pogingen om problemen op wereldschaal vast te leggen en te beheren, vaak in hyperlokale contexten. Dergelijke fictie positioneert de lezers en toeschouwers als *contained subjects*, waardoor genoeglijk literair en filmisch escapisme wordt omgezet in een psychologische overlevingstactiek tegen de achtergrond van het Antropoceen. Dit proefschrift heeft ook tot doel het ecocriticistisch begrip van wat cli-fi kan zijn, te verbreden, door teksten uit een verscheidenheid aan verhalende media te selecteren die de schuilkelder als hun primaire dramatisch steunpunt centraal stellen. Hoewel veel van de teksten die in dit proefschrift worden onderzocht, op het eerste

gezicht weinig met klimaatverandering te maken lijken te hebben, laat een begrip ervan aan de hand van *containment* zien hoe klimaatverandering kan worden weergegeven in modaliteiten die verder gaan dan het apocalyptische denkbeeld. Het proefschrift wordt afgesloten met een onderzoek naar recente real-world implementaties en voorstellingen van de schuilkelder, wat suggereert dat de containmentcultuur op een meer globaal-bewuste (maar potentieel gevaarlijkere) manier blijft bestaan.

